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ISSUE 035 | DECEMBER 2013

@gamer

THE BEST GAMES OF 2013!

PG. 42

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PREVIEW

THIEF

A BELOVED SERIES RETURNS FROM THE SHADOWS. CAN IT REACH GREATER HEIGHTS ON NEXT-GEN? PG. 34

Call of Duty, Zelda, Assassin's Creed

REVIEWS: These are the scores you've been waiting for. PG.59

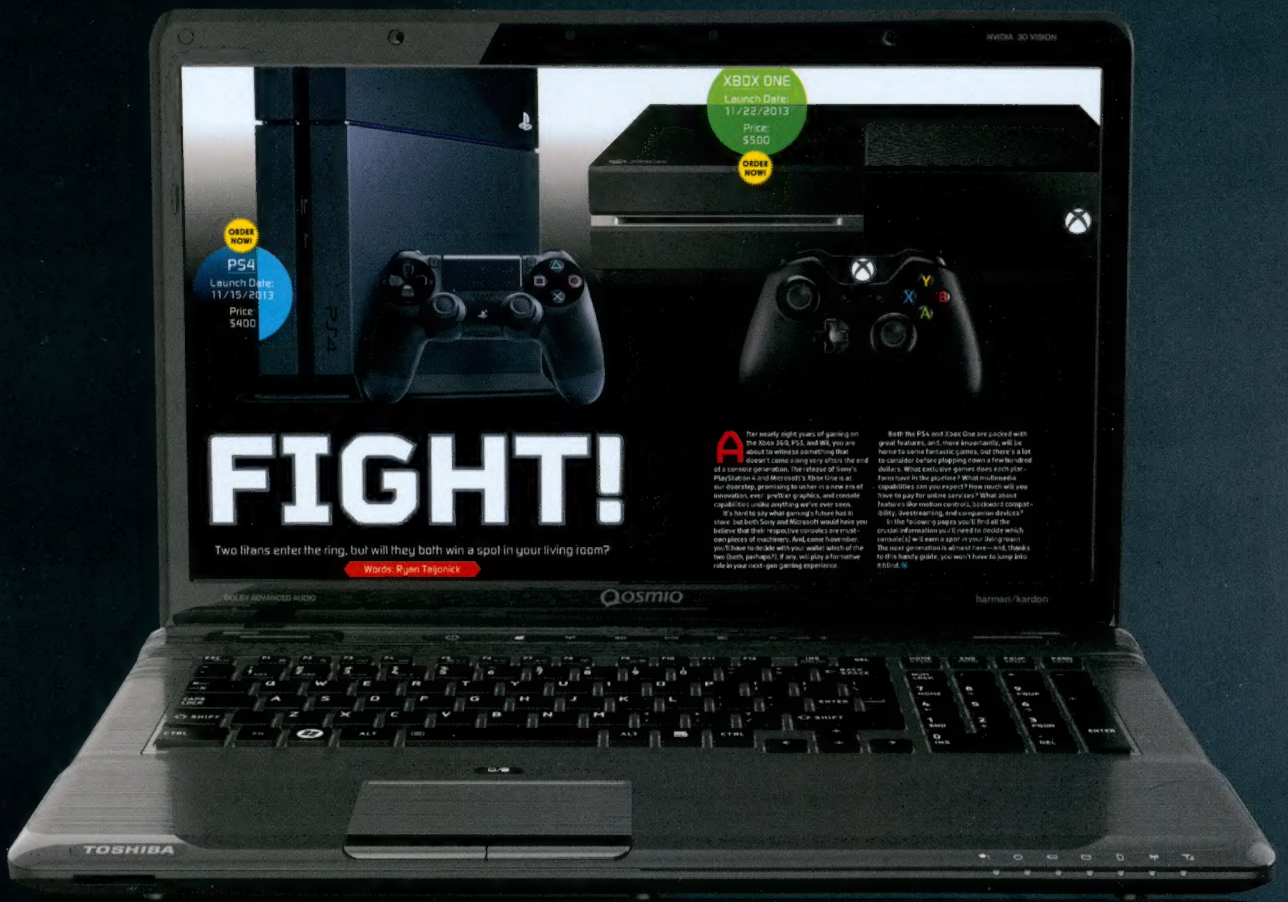
Make Money Playing Games

GUIDE: Pro gamers teach you how to join the big leagues. PG.52

New Year, New Wishlist

PREVIEWS: Fresh looks at early 2014's must-play titles. PG.12

@GAMER IS GOING 100% DIGITAL



DESKTOP

Starting with the new year, @GAMER will be upgrading ALL SUBSCRIPTIONS to the Digital Edition. It has been optimized for viewing on your tablet and desktop, making it easier to read and navigate, and includes bonus video, screen galleries, audio, and one-click links for pre-orders and product information.

IPAD

THE OFFICIAL GAMES MAGAZINE OF BEST BUY®
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GREATEST GAMES OF THE GENERATION
Modern classics you must play before upgrading your console
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FIGHT!
PLAYSTATION 4 OR XBOX ONE?
MAKE THE RIGHT CALL WITH OUR NEXT-GEN GUIDE PG. 40
ALSO INSIDE
Batman, Pokémon, and Skylanders
REVIEWS: The final scores on 2013's biggest sequels. PG. 61
PC Gaming: More Power, Less Money
GEAR: Can a tablet do real games? Find out inside. PG. 88
Mario Versus Eric Cartman
PREVIEWS: New details on December's hottest. PG. 14

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In this ISSUE 35

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34 THIEF
After a decade at rest, master thief Garrett returns to relieve a darker, next-gen city of its valuables.

COVER STORY

88 GEAR
This issue we check out a fancy projector, mid-range speakers, a gaming mouse, the requisite goofily named Razer device, and of course two gaming headsets.

42 BEST GAMES OF 2013
The Brisbane Accord of 1990 stipulates that all game mags choose games of the year come December. We think you'll find us in compliance.

HOW TO...
GAME LIKE A PRO!
We checked in with some top pro gamers to learn what makes them tick. Lots of Doritos, it turns out. (Kidding.)

Previews

12 Dark Souls II
The follow-up to From Software's masochistic sensation promises more blood, tears, and jolly co-operation.

16 Lightning Returns: Final Fantasy XIII
The world ends in 13 days, but that doesn't mean you can't dress well.

20 Donkey Kong Country: Tropical Freeze
First they came for your bananas, now they took your island. Seriously DK, how'd you tick everyone off?

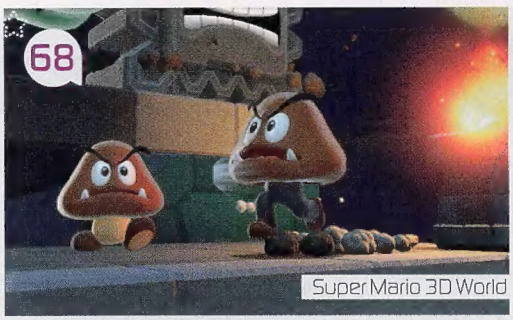
26 Dragon Ball Z: Battle of Z
Fans have been waiting for this almost as long as an average *DBZ* story arc.

28 The Witness
The mind behind *Braid* delivers more fiendish puzzles. Just don't call it *Myst*.

29 Broken Age
This Kickstarted adventure looks so charming we can't even be sarcastic.

30 Strider
This one's about space ninjas, not wandering kings of Númenórean origin.

31 D4
Deadly Premonition's creator will have to work hard to out-crazy himself.



NEWS: FIRST TO KNOW

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Who runs this jungle, anyway?

06 BLIPS
All the news that's fit to blip!

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You've got a tablet. We've got gaming expertise on tap.

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CALL OF DUTY: GHOSTS 60
Not just ghosts but a dog! It's basically an episode of *Scooby Doo*.

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Timbers will shiver in this return to form for the annual series.

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Because "Super Mario Isometric World" would just confuse people.

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This time out buildings can fall on you. War is truly hell.

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Once again cops and racers refuse to put aside their petty differences.

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The title is clever because the main character's named "Link," you see.

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Rumor has it the limited edition includes a real-life Jon Bon Jovi.

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Newly relaxed Olympic rules allow all manner of critters to compete.

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The low-key lowdown on the best add-ons, episodes, and tiny titles.

MEET THE STAFF

Charlie Barratt
Executive Editor

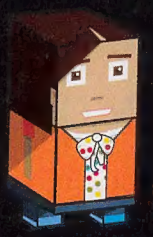
The holidays are supposed to be a time for peaceful reflection and family togetherness. The growing pile of Xbox One and PS4 games on Charlie's desk, however, guarantee none of that will be happening this winter. Sorry Barratts!

Nick Pino
Associate Editor

Nick's fondest Christmas memory is receiving a brand-new PlayStation 2 from his parents. If only they'd remembered to also buy him some PS2 games. Oh well—he needed that extra time with *Crash Team Racing* on PSone anyway.

Jenny Esdaile
Art Director

[Insert requisite "Jenny's from Australia" joke below] We asked Jenny about Christmas Down Under and she said something about Santa wearing a pair of board shorts. We're starting to suspect she's just trolling us.



Jillian Lungaro
Associate Art Director

Jillian's favorite December tradition is cooking and eating cioppino, an Italian-American seafood stew. The plate of oysters she leaves on the mantelpiece each Christmas Eve must serve as a nice change of pace for Santa as well.

Staff_

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Future

BEST BUY

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I don't think next-gen graphics will blow away the current generation of consoles! Isn't 1080p the highest resolution supported? If TVs can't output higher, will we really even see a difference?

—Jayne L. via email

ED: Indeed, 1080p remains the norm (some Xbox One games even use 720p) and most experts seem to agree that we're reaching a point of diminishing returns. PS4 and Xbox One have considerably stronger graphic capabilities than their predecessors, sure, but not to the point that casual onlookers, like for example one's parents, would really notice. That said, they can do a lot more with that 1080p resolution than the last-gen consoles. PS4 and Xbox One games will enjoy much more detailed lighting, particle effects, textures, character models, physics simulations, and so forth. There's a lot more to a good-looking game than just the resolution it runs at.

I'm thinking about getting the new Call of Duty game, but my friend told me it's basically the same game as last year. Is this one worth picking up, or should I save some money and pick up Call of Duty: Black Ops II?

—Rashid T. via email

ED: We like Ghosts a lot—see our review on pg. 60. That said, we're a frugal bunch, so we're gonna suggest a compromise. Buy last year's game now, and enjoy that until critics and fans come to a consensus on Call of Duty: Ghosts. That way you get to enjoy Blacks Ops II right away, and Ghosts might even be discounted by the time you get around to considering it.

I bought a Vita a few months ago, but I can't find anything to play on it! Do y'all have any suggestions?

—Alaina S. via email

ED: We live to give suggestions. We also enjoy alphabetical order. Off the top of our collective head...Aban Hawkins & the 1,001 Spikes (not out yet) looks like an exquisitely frustrating platformer. Disgaea 3: Absence of Detention delivers more number-crunching tactical madness. Earth Defense Force 2017 Portable is the most fun you can have killing ants. Gravity Rush is a rollicking, perspective-flipping delight. Soul Sacrifice is a novel, very addictive action-RPG. Sound Shapes is a great platformer with a killer soundtrack and user-made levels. Spelunky is simply amazing. Wipeout 2048 is a good take on the classic racing series. Zero Escape: Virtue's Last Reward is a visual novel/adventure with a killer storyline. Let us also take this chance to recommend subscribing to PlayStation Plus. $50 a year gets you dozens of free games, quite a few of which will be for the Vita. Now we're out of space, just like your Vita memory card will be after a good few months of PS Plus.

BEST BUY CUSTOMER REVIEWS & RATINGS

WANT TO HAVE YOUR SAY?

What are you playing? Do you like it? Do you hate it? Let other @GAMER readers know what you think—send in a 50 word review to reviews@atgamermagazine.com, and we'll post 'em in each issue.

Submit your review to:
reviews@atgamermagazine.com

TOMB RAIDER

A needed reboot to a series that was losing its luster, Tomb Raider pits a young, injured Lara Croft against man and nature to become the great adventurer we know and love. Beautiful graphics and great voice acting on top of a compelling story easily make this one of the best games this year.

Score: 5/5

—Jay Johnson

FACEBOOK
GAME FANS, UNFILTERED

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@Gamer Magazine What is your ONE word review of *Batman: Arkham Origins*?

Frank Kulaga "Battastic"
Josh Kartchner Epicallyamazing
Samuel J. Bell glitchy.
Ed Baylon Unfinished.
Aaron Knight Ready!
Christian Bejec 5 / 10 ;)
Raven Faust BAD
Ian Millar Perfect.
Blake Boyd GOTY!
Angel Flores great
A. Schade unplayed
Justin Harlon Epic!

GAMING TRENDS,
140 CHARACTERS AT A TIME

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CHARLIE BARRATT TWITTER: @CHARLIEBARRATT
Requisite excited tweet about the new Gabriel Knight game that everyone's been waiting for me to write!!!!!!!

NICK PINO TWITTER: @PEENDADDY
Was *Gears of War: Judgment* the only 360-exclusive game this year? Umm...

ALEXANDRA HALL TWITTER: @ALYXJANEHALL
Just ran the numbers again and the results consistently suggest that Swery65 is 14 better than Suda51.

@GAMER XTRA

If you were reading *@GAMER*'s digital edition, you'd be able to listen to our podcast right here.

[Note: Letters may be edited for size and clarity.]

THE FEED • *HALO* DEV BUNGIE'S MULTIPLATFORM *DESTINY* TO ENTER BETA IN EARLY 2014

Blips...

News, rumors, and game culture deconstructed

NEWS BITES

KINGDOM HEARTS HD 2.5 REMIX will bring HD versions of *KH2 Final Mix* (PS2) and *KH Birth by Sleep Final Mix* (PSP) to the PS3 in 2014.

THE AMAZING SPIDER-MAN 2 will launch alongside the movie next spring. Expect a bigger NYC to explore and "more" of everything from the first game.

GAMES FALL VICTIM TO EPIDEMIC OF DELAYS

FOUR HIGH-PROFILE RELEASES RETREAT DEEPER INTO 2014

There must be something in the air, because Sony and especially Ubisoft have just announced delays for four of their highest-profile upcoming games.

First up is Sony's *Driveclub*, which was set to be a PS Plus freebie upon the PS4's release. No more; citing quality concerns, it's now set for early 2014.

That's small potatoes compared to the carnage over in Ubisoft's lineup. *South Park: The Stick of Truth* is now slated for March 4, a full year after its original date. The high-profile *Watch_Dogs*, too, has been pushed into early 2014.

Bringing up the chronological rear is *The Club*, Ubi's ambitious open-world online racer. You won't join this club until at least mid-2014.

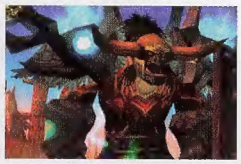
Why all the delays? *Driveclub* and *The Club* need more time in the oven, and hard as it is to believe, Ubi is claiming that is the case for the already much-delayed *Stick of Truth*, too.

Prolific analyst Michael Pachter, meanwhile, suggests Ubi delayed *Watch_Dogs* to avoid cannibalizing sales of *Assassin's Creed IV Black Flag* (and vice-versa). That makes a lot of sense, since Santa only has so much room on his sleigh.

THE RAPTR REPORT

What are the hottest games being played by Xbox 360 and PC gamers? Raptr.com has the answer.

WORLD OF WARCRAFT



1	Grand Theft Auto V
2	DOTA 2
3	Call of Duty: Black Ops II
4	Terraria
5	World of Warcraft
6	Warframe
7	League of Legends
8	Minecraft
9	FIFA 14
10	Final Fantasy XIV Online: A Realm Reborn
11	Battlefield 4 NEW
12	Rift
13	Borderlands 2
14	Team Fortress 2
15	Cookie Clicker NEW

FINAL FANTASY XIV ONLINE: A REALM REBORN

Best Buy Bonus

WATCH_DOGS

It's too bad that Watch_Dogs was delayed, but look on the bright side. Now you have more time to pre-order it and score the Breakthrough Pack, which grants an exclusive single-player mission and the Vehicle Expert perk.

TITANFALL LOVES XBOX

TITANFALL STAYIN' ON XBOX ONE \\

No next-gen console game has half as much buzz as Respawn Entertainment's Titanfall, which blends on-foot FPS action with parkour and giant mechs. Unfortunately for PS4 fans, Respawn's Vince Zampella recently clarified that the game is not just a launch-window Xbox One/PC exclusive, but an exclusive, period. Insert *The Price is Right* lose sound here.

SLEEPING DOGS WAKE

UNITED FRONT ANNOUNCES FOLLOW-UP TO SURPRISE-HIT OPEN-WORLD ACTIONER

Few games suffer near-death experiences as severe as *Sleeping Dogs*, which was totes canned back when it was *True Crime: Hong Kong*. Luckily, Square Enix revived it no less than six months later, resulting in the popular open-world game we know today. United Front Games says first details on the sequel will come in 2014.

PIKA-CLUE?

PIKACHU, PRIVATE EYE

NEW 3DS GAME WILL SEE POKÉMON'S ELECTRIC MOUSE SLEUTH, DEDUCE

This is a weird one—a Japanese TV show demonstrated an early work-in-progress of a Pokémon-related detective game for 3DS. It seems Pikachu will accompany you in your quest to stop a rare, evil(!) Pikachu from causing a ruckus. Apparently motion capture and facial-recognition technology will play into the game somehow, too. Let's file this one under "wait and see."

WAR OF THE MICROCONSOLES \\

A BEVY OF TINY ANDROID DEVICES ALL HOPE TO SCORE A SPOT IN YOUR LIVING ROOM

It all started with the Ouya, the Kickstarter phenomenon that packed mid-level Android gaming power into a tiny TV-compatible cube. Nevermind that buyers didn't like it much; Android-based "microconsoles" are now a thing, and more are on the way.

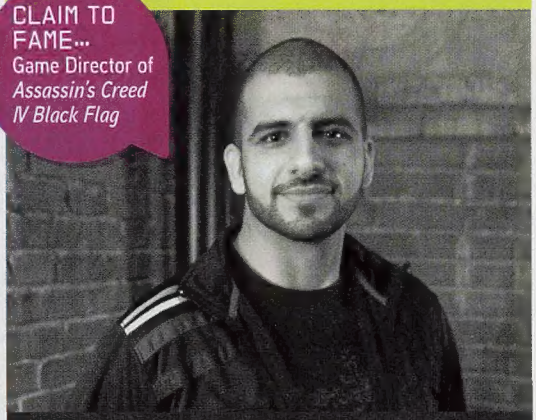
Mad Catz' M.O.J.O. is a higher-end option, with $250 buying you high-end smartphone performance and a relatively solid-looking gamepad. Unlike its competitors, it runs straight-up Android, so it is not limited to a proprietary app store.

The $299 Nvidia Shield is a portable all-in-one device, which can also stream PC games from your desktop. GameStick is lower-end, undercutting the $99 Ouya by $20. And don't forget Ouya 2.0, coming in 2014.

Will any of these find an audience outside Android geeks? They'd better hurry before PC-gaming juggernaut Valve's intriguing new Steambox platform steals their thunder.

Five Questions with...

CLAIM TO FAME...
Game Director of *Assassin's Creed IV Black Flag*



ASHRAF ISMAIL

Game Director at Ubisoft

1 What other games have you worked on?
I started at EA programming *FIFA*. Soon I switched to design, which was really my passion. I designed a few soccer titles, a few basketball titles, *Skate*. Eventually I made my way to Ubisoft where I ended up working on *Prince of Persia*, an unannounced game that got canceled, and then the *Assassin's Creed* franchise.

2 How did working on *AC* compare?
AC is a real beast. The team, scope, and budget are massive. We have a lot to play with, which is cool, but we also have to try to be efficient, really squeeze out every single ounce that the team can handle.

3 How do you choose historical periods?
We take time periods we feel had a real impact on the world, whether it was positive or negative or even just had the potential of doing something meaningful. The pirate republic was the first time a group of people decided to try to attempt a democracy in the New World. It failed, but we felt it was a really cool moment in history.

4 Did you make any tough cuts?
The game is massive. But we actually had some named characters that we ended up having to cut because we just felt we had too many characters in the story.

5 Any advice for aspiring game developers?
This is how I got into the game industry, and I've actually hired people because of this: Make your own game. At home. Whether it's on paper, a board game, a card game, in Flash or Unity or whatever, start with a concept. It doesn't have to be big, just build it to the end. Show that you can.

Words: Andrew Hayward

Featured Game:

FOOTIE FUN

Touch tactics make for stellar soccer

FIFA 14

Platforms:
Free, EA Sports

Finally eschewing its controller-based console origins and embracing the platform, the tablet version of *FIFA 14* introduces solid touch-centric controls, which let you tap to pass, hold to sprint, and swipe to shoot and tackle foes. While the approach simplifies the interactions a bit, it also feels very comfortable and is a smart fit for portable play. *FIFA 14* is a free-to-play offering, and unlike the butchered free tablet version of *Madden NFL 25*, it's a pretty generous affair that lets casual players dig deep into the deck-building Ultimate Team mode. And virtual button controls are available for traditionalists, plus you can purchase a few standard FIFA play modes for just a few bucks within.

Player cards let you build and tweak your team.

Iron Man sends out gem-based blasts.

MARVEL PUZZLE QUEST: DARK REIGN

Platforms:
Free, D3Publisher of America

The venerable match-three-meets-RPG franchise gets a comic twist in an all-new offering that lets you battle foes by lining up like-colored gems. As in previous *Puzzle Quests*, a light story connects the missions—with the witty banter you'd expect from the source material—and here you'll expand your squad's roster by collecting classic comic-book covers along the way. It's a nicely executed and impressively deep mashup.

See, learning can be fun after all.

TYPE:RIDER

Platforms:
$2.99, BulkyPix

Typography might not be the most thrilling subject for a game, but *Type:Rider* wows with its abstract stage design, which explores the history of various popular fonts by building levels using their respective letter designs. The slick-looking side-scroller plays a fair bit like Sony's *Sound Shapes*—in that it's more about the experience than facing a serious challenge—and proves surprisingly captivating as you soak in the sights and even learn a bit along the way.

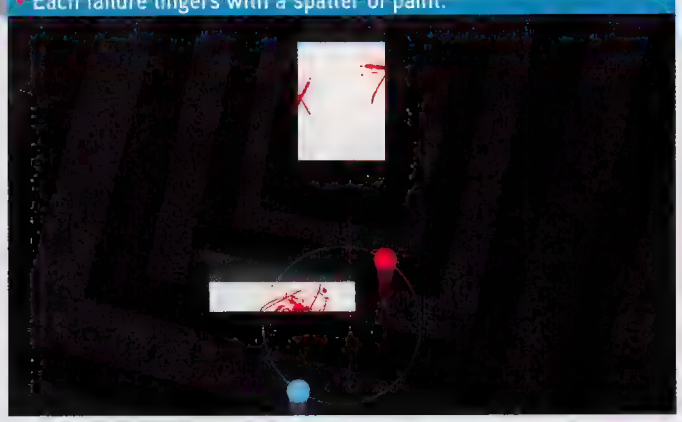
▼ Bash baddies as Bats, wherever you are.

BATMAN: ARKHAM ORIGINS

Platforms:
Free, Warner Bros.

From the makers of *Injustice: Gods Among Us* and Mortal Kombat comes the tablet version of Arkham Origins, which takes the form of a free-to-play fighter. As the Dark Knight himself, you'll pummel an array of common goons and familiar comic foes using a variety of taps, swipes, and button presses, with more than 15 total Batsuits to unlock. It syncs up with the console version for special unlocks, plus it's visually impressive on a large tablet screen.

▼ Each failure lingers with a spatter of paint.



DUET

Platforms:
$2.99, Kumobius

Survival affairs often feature heavy weaponry and loads of violence; *Duet* has only simple shapes and colorful paint splotches, but it's plenty intense all the same. The goal is to survive an ever-changing obstacle course by manning a circular dial that holds two dots, which you must rotate to avoid collisions. Doing so is challenging from the start and only gets crazier with moving (and later invisible) shapes. It's brutal, but so rewarding as a result.

No need for cash with these free favorites

GREAT GRATIS GAMING

FREE GAMES!

As evidenced by this month's picks, free-to-play games are quickly becoming the norm in the tablet world. Yet some titles suffer due to grating "freemium" tactics. Here are five more recent freebies that are well worth tackling on tablets.

01 POCKET TRAINS

(Free)

Like *Tiny Tower* and Pocket Planes before it, *Pocket Trains* delivers a simplified simulation—managing freight lines and railways—that still delivers a rich and entertaining experience in short sessions.

02 SMASH BANDITS

(Free)

Smash Bandits is all about the thrill of the chase as you command a getaway car through a city packed with aggressive cops. Quick-hit missions and an intuitive one-finger control scheme keep things breezy.

03 GIANT BOULDER OF DEATH

(Free)

Supremely silly and plenty of fun, *Giant Boulder of Death* sees you command the titular stone through valleys as you crush evil soldiers, houses, random animals, and more in pursuit of a high score.

04 LIONEL BATTLE TRAIN

(Free)

Forget the model trains you grew up with—*Lionel Battle Train* brings a new edge to commanding the rails, letting you fire rockets at enemies while constructing the best vehicle from scrounged parts.

05 SOLSTICE ARENA

(Free)

Look out, *League of Legends*—the fast-paced *Solstice Arena* puts a multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) experience on your tablet screen. It plays well and offers plenty of content to fight through.

CALENDAR

DECEMBER 2013

It's Food Service Safety Month!

Game Release Date · This day in videogame history...

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
01	02	03	04	05	06	07
ISSUE 35 ON SALE	for Windows.	Star Wars: The Old Republic Galactic Starfighter Japan.	Gran Turismo 6		Gran Turismo 6	
08	09	10	11	12	13	14
					Wii Fit U	
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
Star Wars: The Old Republic Galactic Starfighter						
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			CHRISTMAS	Wii Fit U		
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	EARLY 2014 HIGHLIGHTS: Dragon Ball Z: Battle of Z: 1/28 Lightning Returns: Final Fantasy XIII: 2/11 Earth Defense Force 2025: 2/18 Castlevania: Lords of Shadow 2: 2/25 Thief: 2/25	NEW YEAR'S EVE	DOWNLOADABLE IN DECEMBER: Halo: Spartan Assault: Xbox One, Xbox 360 Rainbow Moon: PS3, PS Vita Starlight Inception: PS Vita Supermagical: PS3, PS Vita		GETS YOU A PRE-ORDER SPOT If you want to keep tabs on all of the pre-order specials that Best Buy and game publishers have put together, just scan this QR code with your smartphone. One webpage will tell all!	

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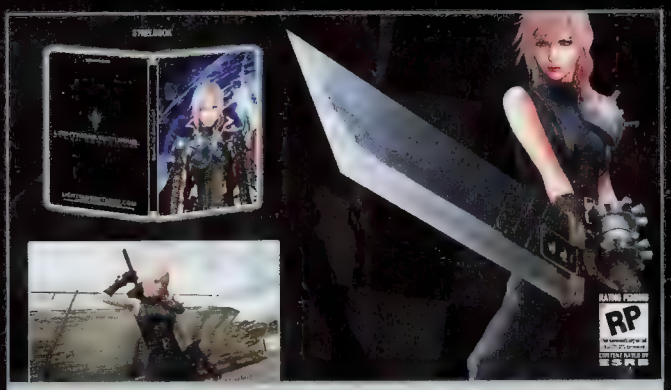


LIGHTNING RETURNS: FINAL FANTASY XIII

Publisher: Square Enix
Developer: Square Enix
Release Date: Feb. 11, 2014
Platforms: PS3, Xbox 360

Pre-order *Lightning Returns* to crossdress your cares (and foes) away with Cloud Strife's SOLDIER First Class uniform, soldier's band, and buster sword, straight from *Final Fantasy VII*.

INFAMOUS SECOND SON

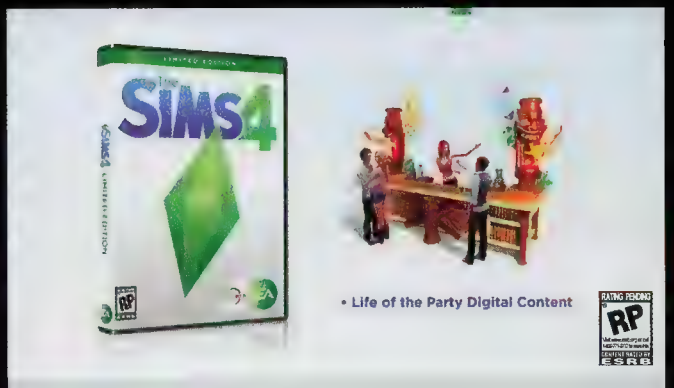
Publisher: SCE
Developer: Sucker Punch
Release Date: February, 2014
Platforms: PS4

Only folks who pre-order *Infamous Second Son* will receive the foil-cover Limited Edition, which includes special missions that reveal the fate of former series protagonist Cole MacGrath. Guessing it isn't anything good.

DARK SOULS II

Publisher: Namco Bandai
Developer: From Software
Release Date: Mar. 11, 2014
Platforms: PS3, Xbox 360, PC

If you're itchin' to die again and again as soon as possible, pre-order *Dark Souls II* and savor the exquisite pain. Between fits of crying you will also enjoy your Black Armor Edition, which comes with a metal case and a soundtrack.



THE SIMS 4

Publisher: Electronic Arts
Developer: Maxis
Release Date: Q3/Q4 2014
Platforms: PC, Mac

Dollhouse enthusiasts who jump in on the ground floor of the latest *Sims* game will score Life of the Party Digital Content, which includes a Flaming Tiki Bar and "Spectacular Party Costumes." Please invite us?

BETA HANDS-ON

DARK SOULS II

Prepare to die again and again and again • Words: Jordan Baughman

▲ Bonfires—good for roasting s'mores and emboldening your flesh with the souls of vanquished demons.

▼ Soon-to-be-dead adventurers can summon other soon-to-be-dead adventurers to cooperatively bite the dust.

For all of you *Souls* fans who took umbrage at new series director Yui Tanimura's perceived threats to increase accessibility and broaden audience appeal, I have a quick disclaimer: This is definitely *Dark Souls*. During my two hours in developer From Software's recent *Dark Souls II* beta, I explored the Huntsman's Copse—a twisted, forsaken wood filled with denizens both murderous and insane. Bloodstains littered the ground offering grisly depictions of other players' last moments, messages were scrawled everywhere to help (or hinder), and even the most innocuous of foes could eviscerate my frail little body if I didn't take them seriously.

The *Dark Souls II* team has made a point to improve upon the multiplayer mechanics of the original game, which (while very inventive) were mired in technical problems and torturous lag. After this network test I feel very optimistic. I summoned friendly players (white phantoms) into my world with ease, and the more confrontational red phantoms kept showing up to stab me to death.

Everything feels on point even in this early build. Even after a mere two hours, there was something about *Dark Souls II* that just got deep inside of me. Every twisting path and hidden passageway evoked a sense of exploration and wonder, coupled with the creeping dread of what dark horror I might actually encounter. The game's landscape spoke volumes more than any NPC I encountered.

EVERY HIDDEN PASSAGEWAY EVOKES A SENSE OF WONDER

Very few franchises have been able to instill in me as strong a sense of awe as the *Souls* series. While this beta was definitely a dip in the shallow end of the pool, it left me energized and wanting more. *Dark Souls II*'s March release now feels like a lifetime away.

▲ White phantoms can only be summoned for specific amounts of time. Think of them as otherworldly office temps.

THE MIRROR KNIGHT //
He's like a chrome Julius Caesar, and he hates you

LIKE A BOSS //

You know that feeling of cathartic release you get from finishing a particularly challenging game? A Dark Souls game can multiply that feeling by 10 and deliver it in its very first boss fight. Dark Souls II seems to be continuing this grand tradition with monstrosities like the Mirror Knight above. From what I've seen, he also makes interesting (read: sadistic) use of the game's online mechanics. Don't worry—I'll let you find out all of that stuff the hard way.

**THE WALKING DEAD ** Dying now has nasty side effects beyond just losing all of your souls. Abandoning this mortal coil still reduces your warrior to a "hollowed" state, but you'll also suffer incremental penalties to your maximum health. Dying repeatedly can get you as low as 50%, making your avatar look more and more zombie-like. Fortunately, the new Human Effigy item can restore the blush to your tortured cheeks.

▲ The warrior is a strength-based class that favors obnoxiously large weapons.

▲ The improved ranged combat totally doesn't suck anymore. Go hunt!

▲ Temple knights can cast heals and buffs on themselves and nearby allies.

▲ The heavily armored soldier is made fun of by the other classes for being boring.

DEEPER CUSTOMIZATION \\

Want to be a mysterious, Zorro-like swordsman? An armored juggernaut who overcompensates with ludicrous weapons? An aberrant mail clerk? Whatever your role-playing desires may be, Dark Souls II's overhauled character-building system aims to accommodate. Which stats you invest in governs everything from how fast your dodge is to how well you break other players' gear. There's even a stat for how well your character wears armor. This updated system, if appropriately balanced, is sure to produce some truly unique builds and offer plenty of mileage for multiple playthroughs and experimental characters.

RED VS. BLUE \\

COVENANTS & YOU
New player covenants will appeal to both the benevolent and murderously psychotic.

LIGHT MY FIRE
What's more important—being able to see, or protecting your squishy insides with a thick iron shield?

PS3 XBOX 360 PC

GAME DETAILS

DARK SOULS II

INFO
Publisher: Namco Bandai Games
Developer: From Software
Platforms: PS3, Xbox 360, PC

RELEASE DATE
March 11, 2014

MULTIPLAYER/ONLINE
Co-op and competitive online

GENRE
Action-RPG

NOT OUT YET? PLAY THIS!

You're doing yourself a disservice by not checking out the cult-hit original *Dark Souls*.

WANT MORE? SCAN THIS!

Scan the QR code with your smartphone to watch the official trailer for *Dark Souls II*.

WHAT'S GREAT:
- ❤ 3D architecture that puts other AAA games to shame
- ❤ Intense melee combat that will leave you breathless

WHAT'S NOT SO GREAT:
- ✖ The beta was only two hours long

▲ It's up to Lightning to protect the souls of mankind from the demonic forces of Chaos.

LIGHTNING RETURNS: FINAL FANTASY XIII

The final chapter awaits • Words: Ryan Taljonick

Saving the souls of mankind in the midst of an apocalypse is a pretty heavy burden for anyone to bear, especially considering Lightning has to do it all by her lonesome as the sole playable character in *Lightning Returns: Final Fantasy XIII*. But after my lengthy hands-on session, it's clear that this generation's FF heroine is more than capable of completing her mission.

My demo began in the Wildlands, one of the four massive regions that compose *Lightning Returns*' world. It was huge in comparison to many of the areas of the previous games, feeling more like an expansive world map than a tiny walled-off corridor. There were towns to explore and quests to take on, and, because the game features a full day/night cycle, NPCs went about their days according to their own schedules, providing an extra bit of realism.

But with a mere 13 days to go before the end of the world (a clock ticks down in real time—if it reaches zero before you finish Lightning's quest, it's game over), I set off on the mission at hand. Lightning was tasked with finding a white Chocobo, a legendary steed whose jumping abilities would open up the next area. Unfortunately, by the time I found the bird, it had been badly wounded by a huge Chocobo Eater. Obviously, I had to fight it.

Combat in *Lightning Returns* places a heavy emphasis on action, as you can freely move around the battlefield, dodging and blocking attacks in real time. Instead of the Paradigm system from *Final Fantasy XIII* and *Final Fantasy XIII-2*, Lightning can shift between three Schemas—fully customizable jobs, each with their own offensive and defensive bonuses. The battle was intense; only by strategically swapping between the Schemas and sparingly using healing items was I finally able to slay the nasty beast and save the cute (but, by now, horribly maimed) Chocobo.

One soul saved, billions to go.

SCHEMATICAL \\

Think of Schemas as Paradigm roles from the previous *FFXIII* games. There are plenty to unlock or purchase, though you can only equip Lightning with three at any given time. You can choose which weapon, shield, outfit, and accessories she'll wear, in addition to which four abilities—encompassing melee attacks, blocks, and magic spells—she'll have access to for each equipped Schema. Variety is key, as a good mix of abilities means you'll be able to find an enemy's weakness.

▲ Perfectly timed blocks mean you won't take damage from attacks.

▲ Expect to see cameos of other *FF13* characters throughout this entry.

▲ Most enemies are weak to certain types of attacks—pay attention as you fight!

BLOW BY BLOW \\

Once you have your Schemas set up, it's time for battle. Lightning may be your only party member, but she can freely swap between her three equipped Schemas at any time during the fight. Each has its own Active Time Battle gauge. After you use abilities from a Schema, including blocks and dodges, you'll have to switch to another so that the first can recharge. Juggling these combat styles adds a surprising amount of depth to each fight, and is sure to keep you on your toes.

FAMILIAR FACES \\

Despite the fact that *Lightning Returns* is set some 500 years after the events of *XIII-2*, you'll run into a healthy mix of characters from the trilogy. Noel, Caius, Snow, Hope, and others all play a role in the game; some will aid Lightning in her journey, while others will fight against her.

TIME FLIES \\

Sure to be a point of contention for some, *Lightning Returns* features a time mechanic. You'll have a set number of hours—13 days in the story's lore—in which to complete your objectives. Lightning will occasionally be able to halt the countdown with special abilities, granting her a bit of extra time to complete side quests and the like, and some missions can only be obtained during certain hours on certain days. While it's technically possible to receive a game over if you fail to complete the main story within the time limit, it's doubtful the limit will be too oppressive.

▲ Turns out 500 years of slumber made Lightning a rather fashionable lady.

▼ For reasons unknown, Noel views Lightning as an enemy. What's going on, exactly?

▶ Hard livin'
Making strategic use of supplies and spells is extremely important. You can only carry up to six restorative items on you at any time, and your health doesn't automatically replenish after battle. Get those dodges down and you should be fine.

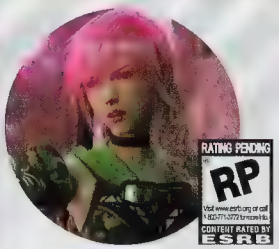
LIGHTEN UP

Customization seems to be a pretty common theme in *Lightning Returns*. As depicted in the above image, you can dictate what outfits Lightning wears, as well as their color schemes. There are tons to find or purchase, and these even extend into her Schemas. Each time you swap between Schemas in battle, Lightning's outfit changes yet again. Best of all, you can find some outfits that are obvious callbacks to various characters in previous *Final Fantasy* games.

▲ Soul power
As the Savior of souls, Lightning automatically gets stronger as she progresses through her quest. The game doesn't feature any leveling system, and enemies will increase in strength to match yours.

PS3 XBOX 360

GAME DETAILS



LIGHTNING RETURNS: FINAL FANTASY XIII

INFO
Publisher: Square Enix
Developer: Square Enix
Platforms: PS3, Xbox 360

RELEASE DATE
February 11, 2014

MULTIPLAYER/ONLINE
Single-player only

GENRE
RPG

NOT OUT YET? PLAY THIS!

Lost Odyssey, made by the creator of *Final Fantasy*, is a fantastic JRPG.

WANT MORE? SCAN THIS!
Scan the QR code with your smartphone to watch the official trailer for *Lightning Returns: Final Fantasy XIII*.

WHAT'S GREAT:
- Intense action-RPG combat
- Massive world with day/night cycle
- Interesting time mechanic...

WHAT'S NOT SO GREAT:
- ...unless it ends up hampering the experience

▼ Apes versus penguins! Show these birds who's boss with some gorilla warfare.

DONKEY KONG COUNTRY: TROPICAL FREEZE

Cooler than a banana popsicle • Words: Chris Hoffman

The bad news is that *Donkey Kong Country: Tropical Freeze* has been delayed from its original holiday release date. The good news is that when the game hits in February it looks like it'll be another grand adventure for gaming's greatest ape.

This time out, Donkey Kong has been ousted from his home by an army of Vikings, and not just your run-of-the-mill Vikings. We're talking animal Vikings, including penguins, polar bears, owls, and giant walruses. DK will have to travel across five sizable islands to reclaim his home, but he won't have to do it alone. DK's little buddy Diddy is back in action, and fan-favorite character Dixie Kong makes her long-awaited return, complete with her hovering ponytail spin and lethal hair attacks. They'll also be joined by a fourth as-of-yet unrevealed character; levels will be packed with secrets, many of which you can reach only by taking advantage of each hero's special skills.

As you make your way through the game's jungles, mountains, beaches, and frigid tundras, you'll engage in trademark *DKC* activities—hopping on enemies, grabbing collectibles, riding in mine carts, swinging on vines, and blasting out of barrels—often presented with dynamic new camera angles. You'll also have some fresh tricks to try out. Like in the vintage *DKC* games, there are underwater stages that will put your swimming skills to the test, and Donkey Kong has a new grab ability that lets him pick up and throw enemies and pull switches to solve puzzles. Add in music by original *DKC* composer David Wise and you get a game that promises to be more fun than a barrel of...well, you know.

DONKEY KONG HAS BEEN OUSTED FROM HIS HOME

▼ The vile Vikings have transformed the tropics into an icy, bone-chilling wasteland.

THE BUDDY SYSTEM \\

When you're fighting against an army of Viking animals, it always helps to have a little backup, which is why DK is joined by Diddy Kong, Dixie Kong, and an additional mystery character. The characters have unique abilities—Diddy uses his jetpack, for example, and Dixie hovers with her ponytail and wields a bubblegum gun. Each player will control a different Kong in co-op mode, but DK can give his pals a piggyback ride so you can join forces.

▲ ON THE RIGHT TRACK

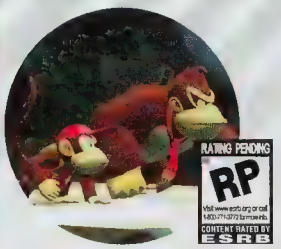
Traveling by mine cart has been a staple of *Donkey Kong Country* ever since the series began. You can jump back and forth between multiple tracks, but watch out for vicious sea creatures that can destroy the rails or turn DK into lunch.

▼ IF APES COULD FLY

HAVING A BLAST \\

As a general rule of thumb, you should never let a gorilla pilot a flying vehicle, especially when that vehicle is a fiery, out-of-control, rocket-propelled barrel. Unfortunately, you don't have much of a choice where Donkey Kong is concerned, so you'll have to rely on your own aerial maneuvering skills to snag all the collectible bananas and avoid an explosive demise. But what's with all the cheese wheels in the background? Is there a giant mouse invasion?

GAME DETAILS



DONKEY KONG COUNTRY: TROPICAL FREEZE

INFO
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: Retro Studios
Platforms: Wii U

RELEASE DATE
February 2014

MULTIPLAYER/ONLINE
Local 2-player co-op

GENRE
Platformer

NOT OUT YET? PLAY THIS!

Get your Wii U platforming fix with the spectacular *Super Mario 3D World.*

WANT MORE? SCAN THIS!

Scan the QR code with your smartphone to watch the official trailer for *Donkey Kong Country: Tropical Freeze.*

WHAT'S GREAT:
- ❤ Lots of challenging co-op platforming fun
- ❤ New dynamic camera and playable characters

WHAT'S NOT SO GREAT:
- ✖ Having to wait until 2014 to finish it
- ✖ Doesn't look a ton better than it did on Wii

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03 ETRIAN ODYSSEY UNTOLD: THE MILLENNIUM GIRL

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04 CALL OF DUTY: BLACK OPS II

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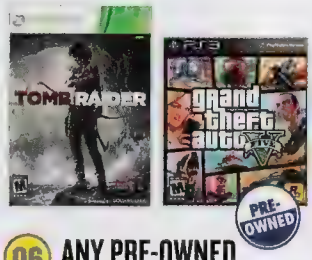

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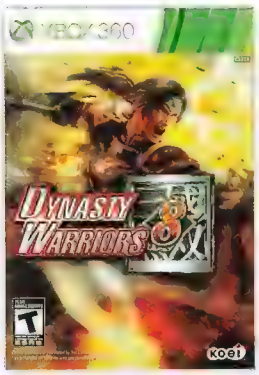

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DRAGON BALL Z: BATTLE OF Z

Charge your *ki* for four-player co-op • Words: Henry Gilbert

The Dragon Ball Z series took the nascent U.S. anime community by storm over 15 years ago, and spawned dozens of games across nearly every console. Aside from a Kinect outing that's better left unmentioned, however, Dragon Ball Z: Battle of Z is the first fighting game the franchise has seen in three years, and it aims to make up for lost time.

The gameplay is similar to that of the Tenkaichi games, dropping you into a massive field that gives fighters space enough to fly, fling massive energy balls, and teleport into brutal combos. Battle of Z changes things up by making each fight a team effort where groups of four battle together online against the likes of Vegeta and Cell in scenes ripped straight from the anime. And in an interesting twist for fans of Z's bad boys, each campaign has an alternate evil path in which you can play as that storyline's villains.

BATTLE OF Z AIMS TO MAKE UP FOR LOST TIME

The more-than-70-characters-deep roster includes obvious choices like Gohan and Piccolo as well as lesser-known villains like Bardock and Hirudegarn. The game also includes the new villains introduced in the recent anniversary film, Battle of the Gods, and there's even an option to build a team of four out of different forms of the same character. Look out for our all-Frieza team online!

The action feels less precise than in a standard fighting game, but what do you expect from characters who can shoot world-shattering beams of energy from their hands? At least they look good doing it in HD graphics that capture the flair of the anime in an attractively cel-shaded style.

Old Rival
Vegeta, Prince of All Saiyans, is still looking pretty spritely.
Goku vs. Vegeta
Once again play out the ultimate battle for spiky-haired dominance.

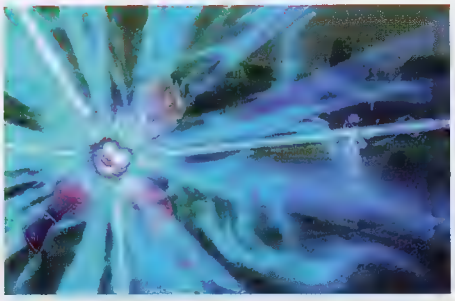
▼ Few things hurt worse than a Super Saiyan gut punch.

READY TO WEAR \\

Even with more than 70 Z Fighters on the roster, alternate colors and costumes add even greater visual diversity. Because you'll likely be facing dozens of other Gokus in online multiplayer, yours might as well stand out with a nice pink-and-yellow combo.

OVER 9,000?! \\

▲ With multiple characters sharing Ki, plan special attacks like these carefully.



▲ Don't try this at home. At the very least you'll scream yourself hoarse.

LET'S COSPLAY \\

You can build teams of four however you want, drawing from the Z Warriors or the many colorful villains they've faced over the years. In this standard team of heroes you may notice that Goku is dressed like fellow manga icon Naruto. That's DBZ returning the favor to Naruto dressing as Goku in his most recent game, *Naruto Shippuden: Ultimate Ninja Storm 3*.

PS3 XBOX360 PS VITA

GAME DETAILS

DRAGON BALL Z: BATTLE OF Z

INFO
Publisher: Namco Bandai
Developer: Artdink
Platform: PS3, Xbox 360, PS Vita

RELEASE DATE
January 28, 2014

MULTIPLAYER/ONLINE
Up to 8-player versus, 4-player co-op

GENRE
Fighting

NOT OUT YET? PLAY THIS!

Naruto Shippuden: Ultimate Ninja Storm 3 is another good go-to anime game.

WANT MORE? SCAN THIS!

Scan the QR code with your smartphone to watch the official trailer for *Dragon Ball Z: Battle of Z*.

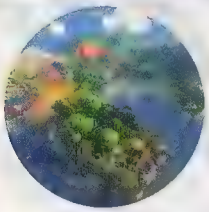
WHAT'S GREAT:
- Covers entire *DBZ* story, including the most recent film
- Huge roster of characters
- Prettiest *DBZ* game ever?

WHAT'S NOT SO GREAT:
- How many more times can we kill Frieza?

PS4 PC iOS

THE WITNESS

If a puzzle's solved and no one is around to see it... • Words: Nick Pino



RATING PENDING
RP
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

GAME DETAILS

THE WITNESS

INFO
Publisher: Number None, Inc.
Developer: Number None, Inc.
Platforms: PS4, PC, iOS

RELEASE DATE
Early 2014

MULTIPLAYER/ONLINE
Single-player only

GENRE
Puzzle

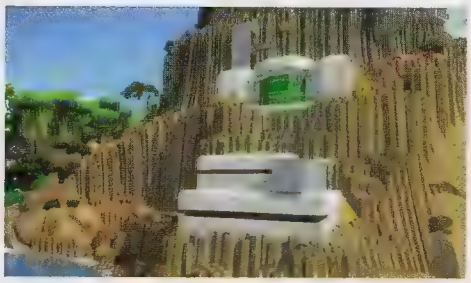
NOT OUT YET? PLAY THIS!

Braid introduced puzzle-loving enthusiasts to Blow's Escher-esque mind.

Whereas some game demos seem content to spoon-feed their players a pre-chewed plot and sprinkle in a few semi-intelligent plot twists, *Braid* creator Jonathan Blow aspires to offer more. At the end of my 45-minute hands-on demo with Blow's latest subversive adventure, *The Witness*, I was left with dozens more questions than answers.

The Witness is an open-world puzzle game, built around a clandestine plot, a never-seen-except-for-their-shadow protagonist, and a puzzle-filled, but otherwise uninhabited, island. While the puzzles are the star of the show, the game won't teach you how to solve them with heavy-handed tutorials or pages upon pages of text; your own trial and error will carry the day. And though one main mechanic remains consistent throughout—connecting one entry point on a grid to its corresponding exit, navigating obstacles along the way—each area of the stunning landscape changes the conditions, slightly, to test just how far you're willing to go to unravel the island's omnipresent mystery.

More than a fantastic-looking puzzle game, though, Blow wants players to use his work as a way to explore videogames as a medium and, hopefully, walk away with a profound, heartfelt experience. Like *Braid* before it, expect this metaphorical 25–40-hour adventure to consume your mental faculties when it debuts on PlayStation 4 and PC in 2014.



▲ Creepy abandoned research facility on a cliff...or potential timeshare? You decide.

▲ The whole game is non-linear, meaning areas like this are never out of bounds.

THE TRUTH IS OUT THERE \\

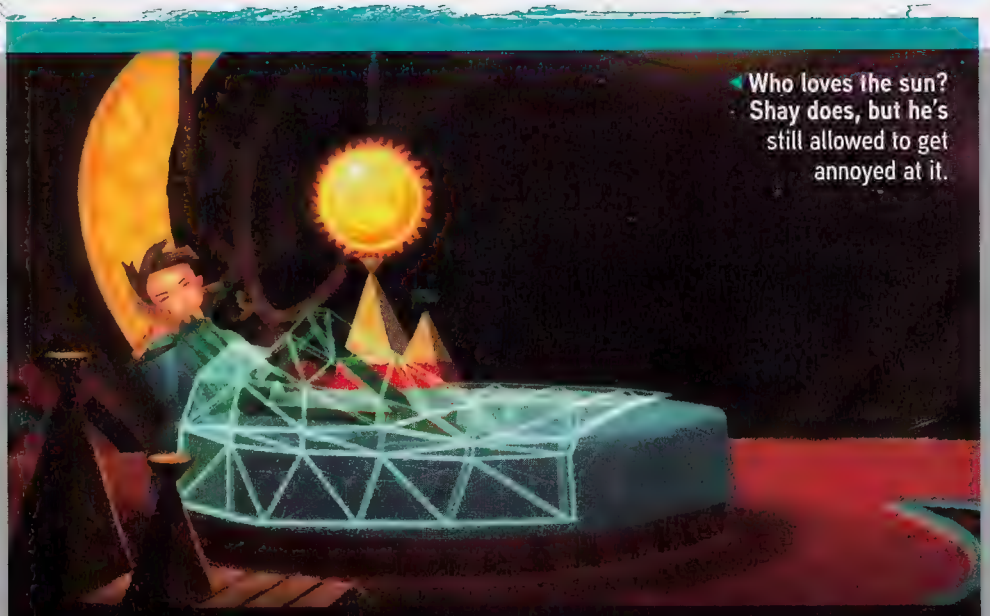
▼ Foreboding and omnipresent, *The Witness*' mystery permeates every inch of the beautiful landscape.

WANT MORE? SCAN THIS!

Scan the QR code with your smartphone to watch the official trailer for *The Witness*.

WHAT'S GREAT:
- ❤ Satisfyingly difficult puzzles
- ❤ Beautiful, diverse backdrops
- ❤ A more-than-meets-the-eye mystery

WHAT'S NOT SO GREAT:
- ✖ Final game may inspire more questions than answers



Who loves the sun? Shay does, but he's still allowed to get annoyed at it.

BROKEN AGE

If it ain't broke... · Words: Hollander Cooper

You're Shay, a boy living in a spaceship and being raised by a friendly AI, but you're bored of the daily routines and want to try new things. Or you're Vella, a girl living in a society where a child is selected at random every year to be sacrificed to a monster, but you're bored of the tradition and want to try new things (aka, not being sacrificed to the monster). These are the two sides of the coin in Double Fine's *Broken Age*, the point-and-click adventure that raised over 3.4 million dollars on Kickstarter last year. Though the two stories might sound totally different at face value, they share several similarities that'll be explored as you jump between the narratives in a game Double Fine founder Tim Schafer says is inspired by his earlier work, *Maniac Mansion*.

Schafer said that he's always been interested in stories like *King Kong* and director Duncan Jones' *Moon*, and he wants to explore the ways that these seemingly unconnected concepts are related in a way only Double Fine could: by clicking on things to solve puzzles while talking to hilarious characters. With an absurdly colorful art style and buckets of wacky humor, the game is an obvious throwback to the point-and-click adventures of old, but it doesn't keep its feet planted in the past. Fans of the genre will notice the interface is sleeker, with improvements that should make it much more accessible for people uninterested in the intricacies of picking up, looking at, and using dozens of objects. Though delays have made some doubt Double Fine's ability, it's looking more and more like *Broken Age* is going to do a good job of scratching your adventurous itch when it comes out in early 2014.

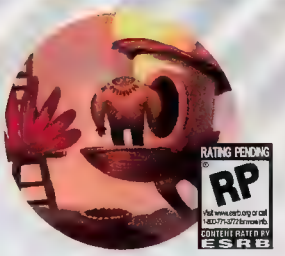
POINTING-AND-CLICKING 2.0 \\

Old games in the genre relied on a slew of adjectives you had to cycle through while trying to progress, but *Broken Age* simplifies things by letting you click to interact with any object in the environment. While some things don't do anything, others will become items you can use, or—more often—spur the funny dialogue you've come to expect from the developer.

▲ Vella's town is full of interesting characters that you'll love chatting up.

PC iOS

GAME DETAILS



BROKEN AGE

INFO
Publisher: Double Fine
Developer: Double Fine
Platforms: PC, Mac, iOS, Android, Ouya

RELEASE DATE
2014

MULTIPLAYER/ONLINE
Single-player only

GENRE
Adventure

NOT OUT YET? PLAY THIS!

The Cave, also made by Double Fine, is a thinky puzzler with a fun tone.

WANT MORE? SCAN THIS!

Scan the QR code with your smartphone to watch the official trailer for *Broken Age*.

WHAT'S GREAT:
- ❤ Awesome art style
- ❤ Signature, irresistible Double Fine charm
- ❤ The point-and-click genre is back!

WHAT'S NOT SO GREAT:
- ✖ It's being broken up into separate parts
- ✖ Puzzles might prove too difficult for some

PS4 XBOX ONE PS3 XBOX 360 PC

RATING PENDING RP

CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

GAME DETAILS

HANDS-ON

STRIDER

INFO

Publisher: Capcom
Developer: Double Helix
Platform: PS4, Xbox One, PS3, Xbox 360, PC

RELEASE DATE

Early 2014

MULTIPLAYER/ONLINE

Single-player only

GENRE

Action

NOT OUT YET? PLAY THIS!

Batman: Arkham Origins Blackgate is a good intro to the "Metroidvania" genre.

WANT MORE? SCAN THIS!

Scan the QR code with your smartphone to watch the official trailer for *Strider*.

WHAT'S GREAT:

- The return of a classic Capcom series
- Arcade-y action meets adventure gameplay
- Sexy next-gen graphics

WHAT'S NOT SO GREAT:

- Didn't Double Helix make that *Battleship* game?

STRIDER

Back to the future • Words: Henry Gilbert

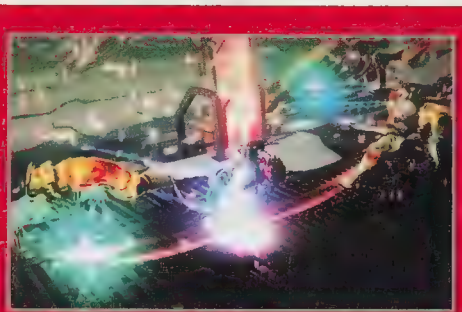
▼ Despite the update, Strider is keeping its classic look.

Strider is a series that has a strange style and an even odder history. The original entry had impressive visuals whether in arcades or on the Sega Genesis, but it took nearly a decade before fans got to see *Strider* 2. Now that's getting its own sequel 15 years later. And while the game still features the cyber-ninja action the series is known for, the gameplay is going a little deeper than its arcade roots.

The original *Strider* put hero Strider Hiryu through the wringer in a handful of tough stages that were built more to gobble quarters than offer up a deep world. This reboot expands on that gameplay by borrowing from the *Metroid* and *Castlevania* series, dropping Hiryu into an expansive, interconnected map that requires unlocking weapons and backtracking to fully explore.

Even with the more open gameplay, the Capcom legend retains the moves that made him famous, including mid-air cartwheels and lightning-quick underhand sword slashes. But now he's got a much larger collection of robot-slaying weapons. The devs appear to be taking care to carry the franchise's weirdness into the next generation, too, meaning Hiryu will be facing dancing ninjas and weird spider creatures into the foreseeable future.

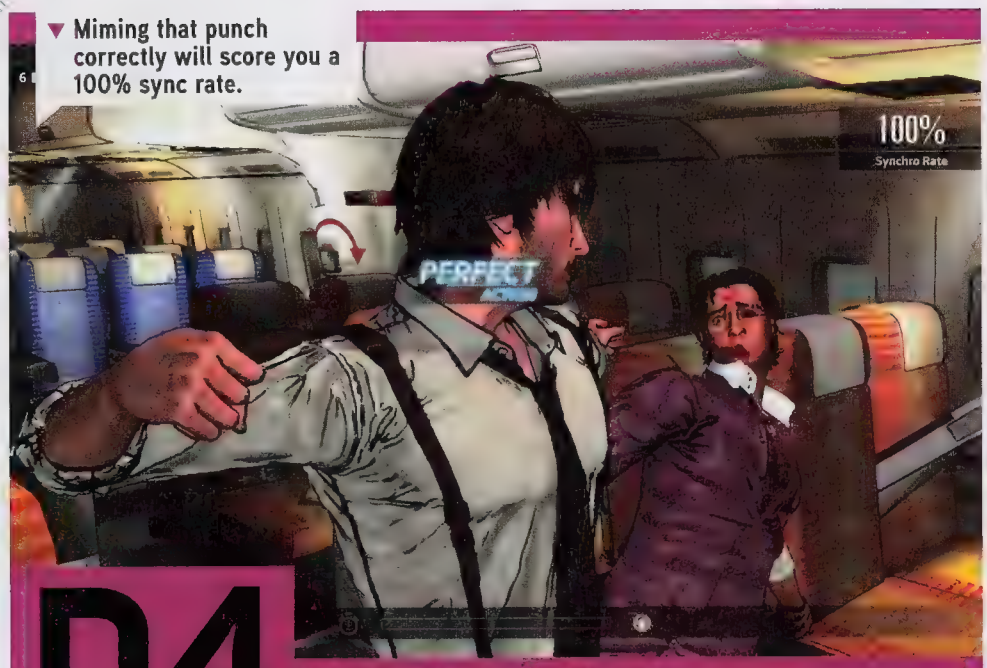
Strider has been a niche series for so many years that it's still hard to believe Hiryu is finally making a comeback in a downloadable game. Hopefully his hard-to-please fans will find it worth the 15-year wait.



▲ If you don't leave beautiful prismatic laser trails, are you really a ninja?

NEED FOR SPEED

You might want to take your time when exploring the game's map. But don't dawdle too much, because speed is Hiryu's greatest ally. To survive you'll need to swiftly juggle attacks, dodge between walls, and bust out intense combos. Let's just hope that Strider's enemies are as diverse as his weapons, or this could get old eventually.



▼ Miming that punch correctly will score you a 100% sync rate.

D4

Things get weird on Xbox One

• Words: Henry Gilbert

Deadly Premonition was such a strangely compelling game that, despite its many technical flaws, many were excited to see developer Hidetaka "Swery65" Suehiro's next bit of weirdness. And in an unpredictable twist worthy of its previous cult hit, Access Games' next game, *D4*, will be an episodic Xbox One exclusive meant to showcase the new Kinect. And that's just the start of *D4*'s surprises.

D4 stands for "Dark Dreams Don't Die," but it also refers to the fourth dimension. The amnesiac lead, a private investigator named David, spends each downloadable episode traveling back to a day from the past that he can't remember, all in search of his wife's killer, a person known only as D.

An early scene transports David aboard an airplane to search not only for clues, but also snacks, because his stamina continually depletes throughout each episode. My demo guide executed all my rummaging around the plane with a surprising amount of precision via the new Kinect.

But then a fight broke out with a suspect. It got continually weirder as David kept finding new weapons among the luggage, before the fight concluded I had pitched a baseball and danced a stewardess to safety. The scene had the kind of fun weirdness you expect from Swery, which may not appeal to everyone, but which could convince Access' ultra-hardcore fans that motion control isn't just for kids.

▲ This retro stewardess looks like David's dead wife? Curiouser and curiouser.

▲ Yeah, I can't explain this one, either. Sorry.

CONTROLLER OPTIONAL \\

Hate motion controls and are unconvinced that the next-gen Kinect will change anything? Then you'll be happy to know that you can also play with a standard controller, via more typical QTE-style inputs. So, don't worry if you don't yet feel ready to step into a future of grabbing virtual cups of coffee.

GAME DETAILS — FIRST LOOK

D4

INFO

Publisher: Microsoft
Developer: Access Games
Platforms: Xbox One

RELEASE DATE

Early 2014

MULTIPLAYER/ONLINE

Single-player only

GENRE

Adventure

NOT OUT YET? PLAY THIS!

Beyond: Two Souls isn't as comedic, but shares *D4*'s motion controls and mystery plot.

WANT MORE? SCAN THIS!

Scan the QR code with your smartphone to watch the official trailer for *D4*.

WHAT'S GREAT:

- ❤ Happily weird
- ❤ Makes good use of Kinect controls
- ❤ Has more personality than most early Xbox One games

WHAT'S NOT SO GREAT:

- ✖ Will this game share *Deadly Premonition*'s tech issues?

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THIEF

The signature stealth series returns the genre to its shadow-stalking roots

Words: Matt Cabral

PRE-ORDER BONUS!

Pre-order Thief to receive The Bank Heist, an exclusive in-game mission with new loot to grab and unique security challenges to overcome.

"THERE IS NO REWARD
WITHOUT RISK.
THE CHALLENGE IS
EVERYTHING."

"This is a different game, it requires players to think about their options and adapt," begins Daniel Windfeld Schmidt, lead level designer on Square Enix's forthcoming *Thief*. The Eidos Montreal developer is referring to the title's strict adherence to stealth-focused gameplay. Unlike contemporary "stealth" entries, such as *Splinter Cell Blacklist* and *Dishonored*, this reimagining of the 15-year-old franchise offers no guns-blazing option for aggressive gamers.

As black-clad bandit Garrett, you are strongly encouraged to stick to the shadows, adapt to environments, carefully manage resources, and pick battles with extreme caution. While watching the protagonist utilize the element of surprise to eliminate a trio of threats, Windfeld Schmidt continues, "Independently of how you want to play, the optimal strategy is always working from the shadows. This is what makes the *Thief* franchise stick out."

In this particular instance, Garrett, while attempting to infiltrate the manor of the game's menacing Baron, utilizes the cover of darkness—coupled with an arrow, bottle, and bone-cracking blackjack—to bring three guards to their knees. In a seamless display that could pass for a pre-rendered cinematic, he gets the group's attention by beaning the first baddie with the tossed bottle, then introducing the second's skull to a razor-sharp arrow before he can react; the third guard, given more time than his mates to retaliate, attacks Garrett but is quickly silenced by the blackjack.

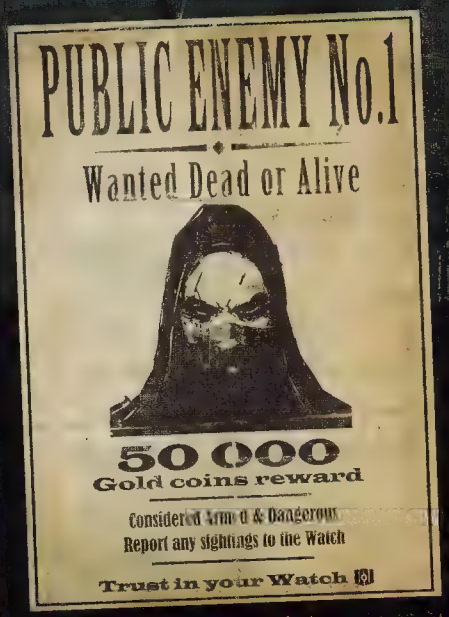
Windfeld Schmidt reminds that Garrett isn't "Rambo", stressing that, despite the preceding encounter's cinematic flair, pulling off such against-the-odds feats favors sharp wits as much as quick reflexes. "You have to read your environment, pick your timing, and use everything you have to your advantage. Garrett's always been an underdog in a physical fight...he has to think things through before doing them."

As this portion of my demo closes, Garrett, who's narrating his escape from the manor—with priceless loot in tow, of course—best sums up the game's return to pure, predatory stealth: "There is no reward without risk. The challenge is everything."

"GARRETT'S ALWAYS BEEN AN UNDERDOG IN A PHYSICAL FIGHT... HE HAS TO THINK THINGS THROUGH"

▲ Players craving a bit more action can slay with cinematic style by triggering brutal take-down moves on unsuspecting foes.

Stalk with caution and keep your eyes peeled for med-packs, as *Thief* believes regenerating health meters are for crybabies.



**AN ARROW FOR ALL OCCASIONS ** Garrett may not possess a gun or the ability to conjure swarms of attacking rats, but he does pack quite the quiver on his back. On top of the standard flesh-flaying broadhead arrows, you can equip water and fire varieties for extinguishing and igniting flames, as well as gas-tipped "choke" projectiles, which work as advertised. Especially crafty players can also unleash blunt and rope arrows to distract enemies and scale higher structures, respectively.

BASSO \\

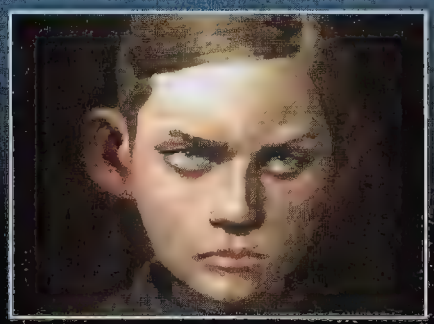
The closest thing Garrett has to a friend, Basso is a shady character who always has "jobs" that need doing. Agreeing to steal stuff for him during my hands-on time often came with a smirk and an "if you get caught, we never met" condition.

ERIN \\

I don't see Garrett's protégé during my demo, but the female thief plays a prominent role in the backstory. After parting ways over her recklessness, the pair reunites for one last job that ends in tragedy and sets up the game's twisty narrative.

THE BARON \\

Developers won't divulge whether this character is the game's villain, but we know Garrett infiltrates his manor during a public uprising against the ruling figure. If this early portrait is any indication, he probably doesn't grow up to be a good guy.



**HAND-Y MAN ** I spent much of my hands-on time in *Thief*'s Stonemarket hub-world, where I lifted lots of shiny objects from clueless marks. While I've performed this act in countless other games, it felt more authentic behind Garrett's sticky fingers thanks to the designers' detail-drenched approach to displaying his hands. Where a button-press might magically transport objects to your inventory in most first-person offerings, *Thief* animates each of Garrett's interactions, whether they're examining a priceless chalice or scooping up a single coin. As art director Nicolas Cantin explains, this small inclusion significantly ups the immersion: "We accented all the looting animations to reward the player. The hands are really important; they're used to show the emotion of Garrett...they are a character in themselves."

▲ On top of a mysterious claw he inherits from his apprentice, Garrett's gear upgrades include a ratchet and wire-cutters.

01 ASTUTE AI
Enemies will relight torches you extinguish and take active notice when one of their unlucky allies doesn't return from patrol.

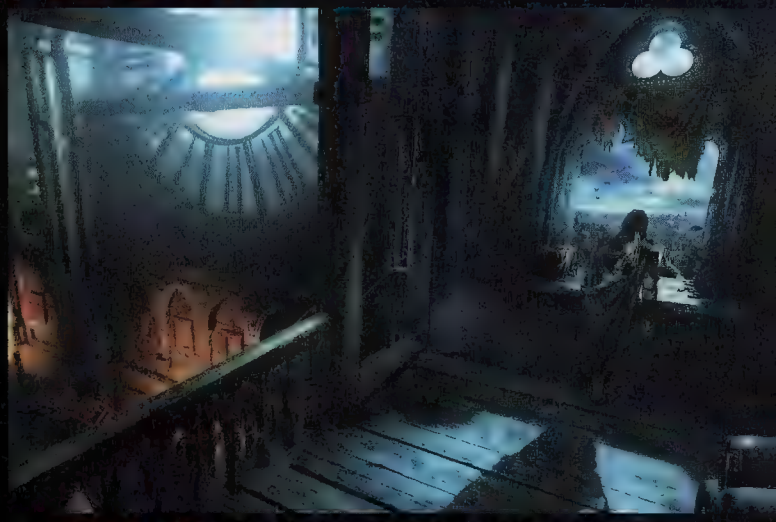
02 NEXT-GEN
PS4 and Xbox One thieves will experience higher-fidelity visuals, faster streaming and loading, and slicker lighting.

03 EXT-G
In addition to leaping from the shadows, you can deliver a stealthy death from the cover of *Thief*'s impressively realistic volumetric fog.

A PILFERER'S BEST FRIEND \\

In addition to his varied arsenal of arrows and gear, Garrett can turn the tables with "Focus," a helpful mechanic that slows combat, quickens lock-picking, displays enemy patrol footfalls, and highlights traps, valuable items, and interactive elements within the environment. The tool, whose existence is justified in the story, does not regenerate automatically, but can be refilled with found or purchased poppy plants. Like many of the game's difficulty mitigators, this one can be turned off by old-school players craving a more punishing playthrough.

OLD-SCHOOL PLAYERS CAN OPT FOR A MORE PUNISHING PLAYTHROUGH



▲ **LOOTER'S LAIR: :** The Clocktower serves as a home-base of sorts, where Garrett can regroup and admire his ever-expanding collection of stolen goodies.

Those who favor careful observation over reckless aggression just might live long enough to enjoy all that sparkly loot.

STEALING THE SHOW \\

While *Thief*'s narrative unfolds entirely at night, its incredibly atmospheric presentation sports much more than pitch-black alleyways. Focused on portraying what art director Nicolas Cantin calls "the clash between worlds," the immersive environments yield a striking contrast between industrial and medieval settings.

Because the story's fictional—and simply-dubbed—"City" exists in a universe all its own, unburdened by historical accurateness, the designers are also free to toss in some Steampunk, Gothic, and Victorian touches for good measure. Layer this absorbing architectural mash-up with slick effects, such as dynamic lightning and volumetric fog, and lurking in the shadows has never been so much fun.

SHOOT WISELY: Ammo's scarce in *Thief*'s resource-starved world, so unleashing a flurry of arrows is not a smart move.

WHEN ALL ELSE FAILS: While you'll want to avoid up-close encounters, there's still opportunity to break a few bones.

JOSEPH KHOURY
PRODUCER

In regard to story, setting, and characters, were there any elements from the original *Thief* games you felt absolutely needed to be a part of this reimagining of the franchise?
Yes, absolutely. We wanted to bring Garrett's personality back and match the voice to the character. Even though the actor is different, Garrett's traits [and] confidence are important things we wanted to bring back story-wise.

And in terms of staying true to the series' signature gameplay, was there any core DNA you wanted to retain or refine?
Stealth, of course, but also Garrett's tools. The bow is a very traditional thing for *Thief*; Garrett's always had a bow and a variety of tools that allow him to maneuver around the environment, extinguish light, ignite it, play with light and dark...that's all important and core for the stealth experience that we wanted to bring back.

Conversely, was there anything you really wanted to avoid or, at least, greatly improve upon from the previous games?
Probably story delivery. We want to allow the player to have a nice blend between their opinion of what's going on and the story we're telling. With the animation and audio tools that we have today, we now have the opportunity to tell a much deeper story than we've been able to in the past...a more believable story.

NICOLAS CANTIN
GAME DIRECTOR

How does this *Thief* story fit into the franchise's larger narrative framework?
It's not a prequel or a sequel to the previous games; it's something new, our reinvention of the story itself. We have a prologue where we tell exactly what's happening, what's starting this new story. We have some homages to the previous stories, but it's really all new.

It seems lots of effort's gone into supporting the story's dark themes with an equally moody setting. What were some of the artistic goals when coming up with *Thief*'s atmospheric world?
Compared to the previous games, we wanted some aspects to be more mature and more cinematic. If you're in a back alley, we want you to be scared. We also wanted a credible world; we wanted the architecture and even non-existent mechanisms to feel credible. The goal was not to do a hyper-realistic game, but a [fun] credible game that looks also mature.

Did the next-gen hardware allow you to better achieve these goals?
The volumetric fog was really interesting for the next-gen versions. You can see it, you can go through it, you can feel it as a character...almost pass your hand through it and see it react. If you go into it with a fiery torch, for example, it will light the fog around you...it's just crazy.

PS4 XBOX ONE
PS3 XBOX 360 PC

GAME DETAILS

THIEF

INFO
Publisher: Square Enix
Developer: Eidos Montreal
Platforms: PS4, Xbox One, PS3, Xbox 360, PC

RELEASE DATE
February 25, 2014

MULTIPLAYER/ONLINE
Single-player only

GENRE
Stealth

NOT OUT YET? PLAY THIS!

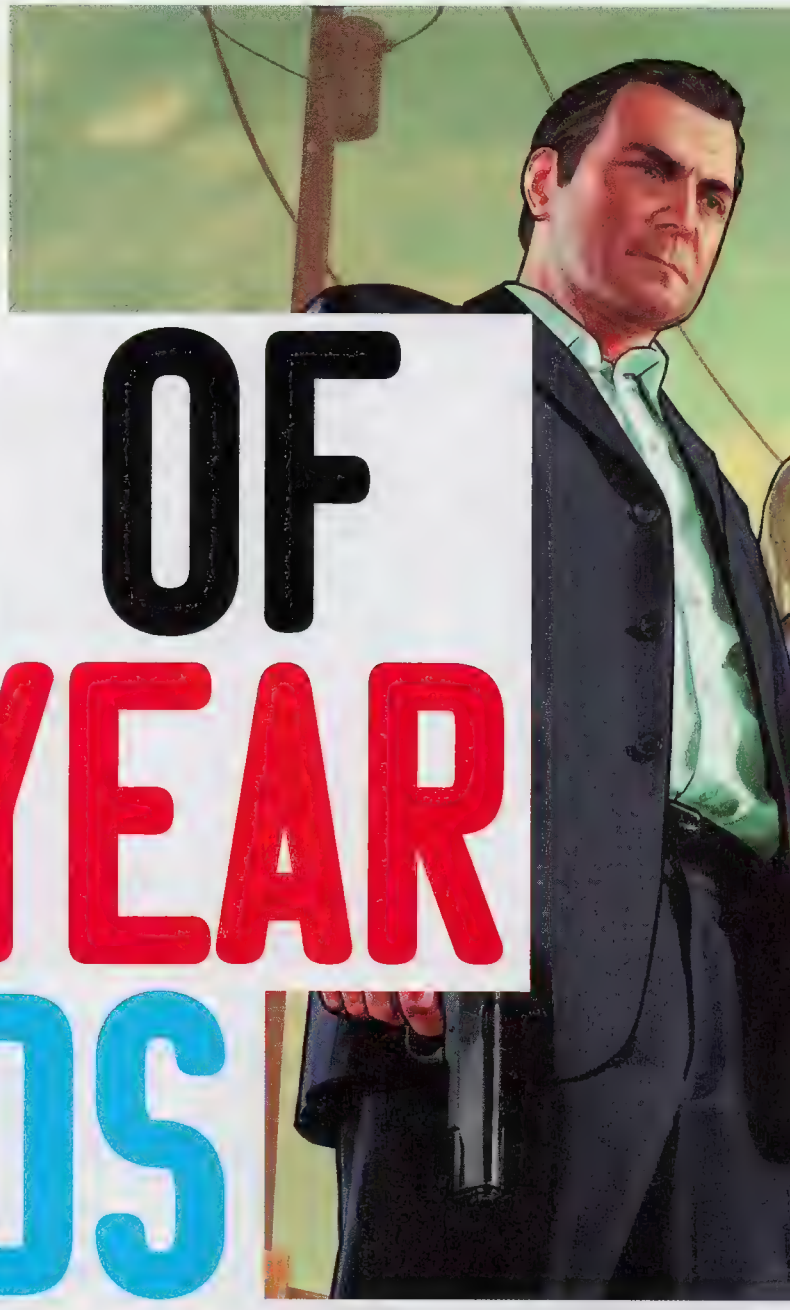
Ghost your way through last year's *Dishonored* for a taste of *Thief*'s stealth.

WANT MORE? SCAN THIS!
Scan the QR code with your smartphone to watch the official trailer for *Thief*.

WHAT'S GREAT:
- ❤ Dynamic, story-driven stealth in an immersive, atmospheric world
- ❤ Unmatched lighting and fog effects
- ❤ Prettiest first-person hands I've ever seen

WHAT'S NOT SO GREAT:
- ✖ Is the stealth too punishing for casual crooks?

2013 GAME OF THE YEAR AWARDS



A look back at the best of everything in gaming

• Words: @GAMER staff and Andrew Hayward

It's a time of great change in the videogame industry. The PlayStation 4 and Xbox One are vying for control of your living room with a heap of cutting-edge technology within. After a slow start, the Wii U is finally hitting its stride with some great games, tiny micro-consoles (like Ouya) are trying to kick-start an indie revolution, and PC gaming continues to surge. Mobile and tablet games, meanwhile, are getting better and better while maintaining tiny price points.

What does that all mean? Games are everywhere now, and there are more amazing ones to be found than ever—whether you like them big and bold, small and scrappy, or somewhere in between. No doubt, 2013 had an incredible wealth of fantastic offerings, from amazingly crafted AAA experiences like *Grand Theft Auto V*, *The Last of Us*, and *BioShock Infinite* to compact and charming affairs like *Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons* and *Gone Home*.

We've racked our brains to pick the best games of the year across platforms and genres, and you can be assured that whatever your tastes and gaming tendencies, each title on this list will provide a satisfying and memorable experience.

GAME OF THE YEAR

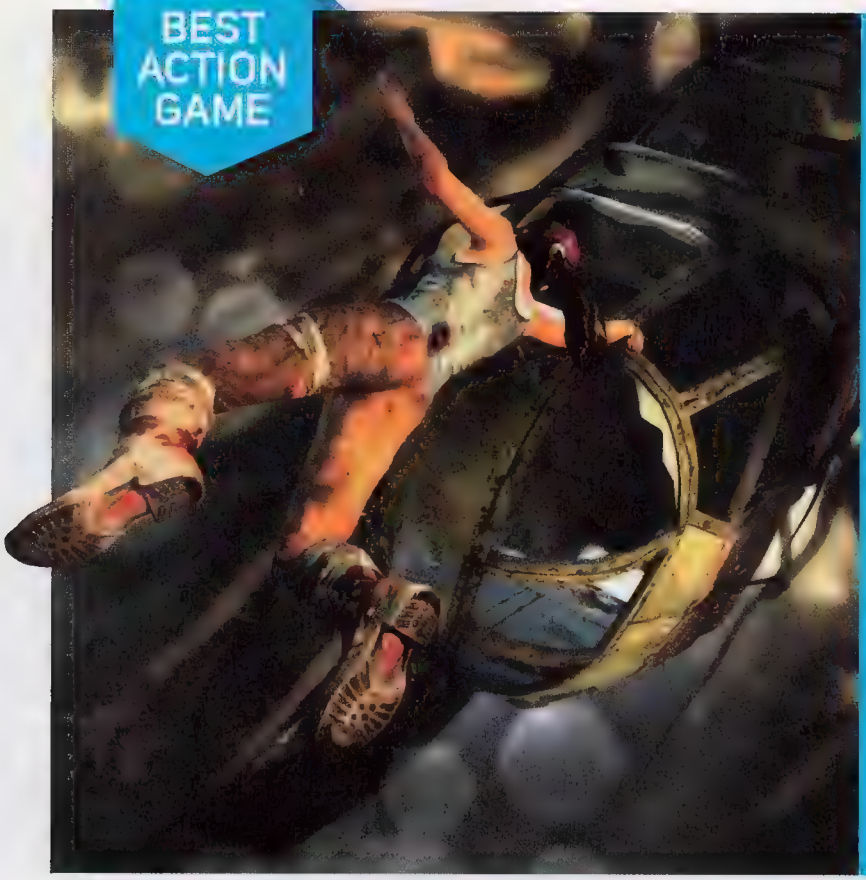
GRAND THEFT AUTO V

GAME OF THE YEAR

Publisher: Rockstar Games • Developer: Rockstar North • ESRB: Mature

If there's one game above all that we've poured the most hours into (despite it only coming out recently), it's *Grand Theft Auto V*, easily Rockstar's most accomplished open-city affair to date. Where its predecessor pursued a less bombastic approach, *GTA5* is lively, entertaining, and fully explorable from the start, with the enormous San Andreas loaded with a bevy of intense and/or hilarious activities and missions to tackle. *Grand Theft Auto V* splits its lengthy core campaign between three distinct leads, who converge in dramatic heists where you can swap between characters and pick your own plan for success. And the game marks bold new territory with *Grand Theft Auto Online*, a sizzling multiplayer experience that lets up to 16 players take on missions—and each other—in a chaotic online city. Rockstar routinely pumps out legendary open-world action games, yet time and again, we're still floored by how remarkable they really are. *Grand Theft Auto V* does it again.

RUNNER-UP: BIOSHOCK INFINITE



TOMB RAIDER

BEST ACTION GAME

Publisher: Square Enix • Developer: Crystal Dynamics • ESRB: Mature

Lara Croft's adventures have excited and delighted over the years, but the template was starting to grow stale. Rather than push the iconic adventurer to even bigger and brasher heights, Crystal Dynamics opted to strip away her cocky and confident demeanor and revisit Croft's origin story in a fresh light. The result is an amazing action experience that spotlights a very human Lara—a young woman unfamiliar with danger and having to make very difficult decisions for her own survival. But you'll make those calls with her, and as she evolves from a scared and untested explorer into an empowered leader and fighter, the game itself strikes a new tenor and sucks you in further. Though *Tomb Raider* relies on familiar genre elements at times, the result is an impeccably well-executed adventure that spotlights a different kind of lead character on a tenuous and terrifying quest. In starting fresh, *Tomb Raider* reignites a once-great franchise.

RUNNER-UP: DMC: DEVIL MAY CRY

CALL OF DUTY: GHOSTS

BEST SHOOTER

Publisher: Activision • Developer: Infinity Ward • ESRB: Mature

Infinity Ward's first non-*Modern Warfare* entry in eight years may not significantly overhaul the shooter's tried-and-true cinematic approach, but it certainly punches things up in many meaningful respects. On the campaign end, the post-quake setting—complete with aftershocks—adds an extra level of tension to the action, plus the addition of your companion dog injects a unique element into the formula. When it comes to multiplayer, *Call of Duty* outdoes itself once again with fresh and exciting new modes like Hunted and Grind, plus maps that can be altered during play. And co-op is no slouch here, with the intense and entertaining new Extinction and Safe Guard modes keeping you blasting with buddies. With a nice next-gen boost in tow, *Call of Duty: Ghosts* steps up its game on all fronts without shedding what we love about the series.

RUNNER-UP: METRO: LAST LIGHT

POKÉMON X/Y

BEST RPG

Publisher: Nintendo/The Pokémon Company • Developer: Game Freak • ESRB: Everyone

For a game so focused on evolution and improvement, Pokémon has been startlingly resistant to change over the years, even in its earlier dual-screen iterations. Luckily, Pokémon X and Pokémon Y break from the decades-old tradition just enough to spice up the classic formula in really fun and exciting ways. As ever, the objective is to set out into the world as a young trainer, capturing and battling pint-sized creatures as you face both computer-controlled and online human foes. A long-overdue visual overhaul is the most noticeable upgrade here, as Pokémon X and Y utilize the 3DS hardware for vibrant new cel-shaded designs, plus a new perspective to the world through the lack of a consistent 3D effect (it's still there, but it's optional). Other quality-of-life improvements like trainer customization and Mega Evolutions make for an even more accessible affair, as do the streamlined interface and higher-on-plot approach, resulting in the most entertaining and entertaining Pokémon experience...

RUNNER-UP: NI NO KUNI

FIRE EMBLEM: AWAKENING

BEST STRATEGY GAME

Publisher: Nintendo • Developer: Intelligent Systems • ESRB: Teen

We've only seen a handful of the Fire Emblem games that Nintendo has released in Japan over the last 23 years, but Awakening may well be the best of them. The tactical role-playing series is in fine form on Nintendo 3DS, and part of the appeal comes from an (optional) softer approach to the action. Rather than force you to suffer the permanent death of units, you can skip out on such brutality—it's like strategic training wheels, but they'll come in handy as Fire Emblem: Awakening offers few other concessions. It's a challenging campaign however you proceed, and it features some of the series' great hallmark elements, like support levels for paired units, special battlefield skills, and a very flexible and granular class system. It's a hearty and engrossing handheld strategy affair like nothing else out there today.

RUNNER-UP: COMPANY OF HEROES 2

FIFA 14

BEST SPORTS GAME

Publisher: EA Sports • Developer: EA Canada • ESRB: Everyone

It seemed impossible after last season, but the best got even better this year in the case of *FIFA 14*, EA's superb soccer simulation. Building off of the stellar core that's been refined in recent entries, the latest puts greater emphasis on the middle of the field than in the past, making for a more balanced and complete game that's further enhanced by player momentum tweaks and better AI defensive reactions. You'll have to play smarter to succeed, but the improved interactions allow for such precise actions. *FIFA 14* expands the feature set with the addition of online co-op in the Seasons mode, letting you pair up with a partner to topple other teams from around the world. And the celebrated Ultimate Team mode is simply extreme thanks to the new chemistry variable that affects your created squad. *FIFA* can be intimidating for novices, but it rewards such dedication with finessed footie action.

RUNNER-UP: NHL 14

ASSASSIN'S CREED IV BLACK FLAG

BEST OPEN-WORLD GAME

Publisher: Ubisoft • Developer: Ubisoft Montreal • ESRB: Mature

Basing *Assassin's Creed IV* around a pirate theme seemed like a potential "jump the shark" moment for the series, but it's proved quite the opposite. Instead, it's just the spark the series needed after a couple of lesser entries—and much of the fun found within is due to the excellent open world concocted for *Black Flag*. Ditching stuffy old cities for island settings and the rough life of a seafarer, it's much rowdier in tone, and roaming the terrain never feels like a slog. *Assassin's Creed IV* comes off much more like a true sandbox, with numerous independent pieces that work well together to generate awesome dynamic moments and surprising encounters; clearly Ubisoft Montreal took some cues from its own *Far Cry 3* in that regard. The result is a world we can't stop exploring, even after the campaign's concluded.

RUNNER-UP: SAINTS ROW IV

BATTLEFIELD 4

BEST MULTIPLAYER GAME

Publisher: Electronic Arts • Developer: DICE • ESRB: Mature

Online multiplayer combat has evolved—or rather, *levolved*—with the release of Battlefield 4, which pumps up the reliably frantic team-based skirmishes with the addition of new "levolution" events found on nearly every map. The real-time environment-altering moments see, for example, a massive skyscraper crumbling to the ground, which affects everyone on and near the building and permanently alters the terrain for the rest of the match. But that's just the cherry on top of an already-amazing multiplayer experience—one in which cooperation is absolutely essential, vehicles are always an entertaining element, and the wide range of unlockables and customization options let you pick your own personal play style. Some early bugs are still present as of this writing, which will no doubt be ironed out shortly, but there's still nothing quite as satisfying as dominating a 64-player match with gutsy play and quick reactions.

RUNNER-UP: SPLINTER CELL BLACKLIST

BIOSHOCK INFINITE

BEST NARRATIVE

Publisher: 2K Games • Developer: Irrational Games • ESRB: Mature

As with the original *BioShock*, *BioShock Infinite*'s campaign grabs hold of you and simply won't let go until you've seen it through. Storytelling is key to its grip, thanks to the rich tale experienced through the eyes of Booker DeWitt, an ex-Pinkerton agent sent to recover Elizabeth, a mysterious young woman held captive in the floating city of Columbia. It's not only a gorgeous setting, but also one flush with character and conflict, as opposing forces battle for control amidst your own ambitious quest. Strong as the dialogue, flavor text, and cut-scenes are, however, it's ultimately the amazing performances that sell *BioShock Infinite*'s tale. Elizabeth, in particular, is totally believable in her role, but all of the stellar voice work and animations help convey a fantastical story that hits harder than anything else released this year.

RUNNER-UP: BEYOND: TWO SOULS

BEST PLAYSTATION GAME

THE LAST OF US

BEST PLAYSTATION GAME

Publisher: Sony • Developer: Naughty Dog • ESRB: Mature

Naughty Dog established itself as one of the premier makers of big, cinematic affairs with *Uncharted 2*, but while *The Last of Us* maintains the studio's flair for polished AAA experiences, it's the tonal opposite of its bombastic predecessor. Instead, *The Last of Us* is a dour, melancholic trudge through the remaining dregs of society set 20 years following a population-zapping fungal epidemic, with broken-down lead Joel and his teenaged companion Ellie attempting to survive during a cross-country trek. Blending exploration with puzzle solving, stealth, and moments of all-out action, *The Last of Us* is an intense quest made all the more interesting by its very human characters and their oft-grim interactions. Joel and Ellie's evolving relationship is powerfully presented, whether they're wandering a ruined city or working in tandem to overcome aggressive survivors in their path, and it helps ground this memorable affair and make it all the more heartbreaking.

RUNNER-UP: KILLZONE: SHADOW FALL

FORZA MOTORSPORT 5

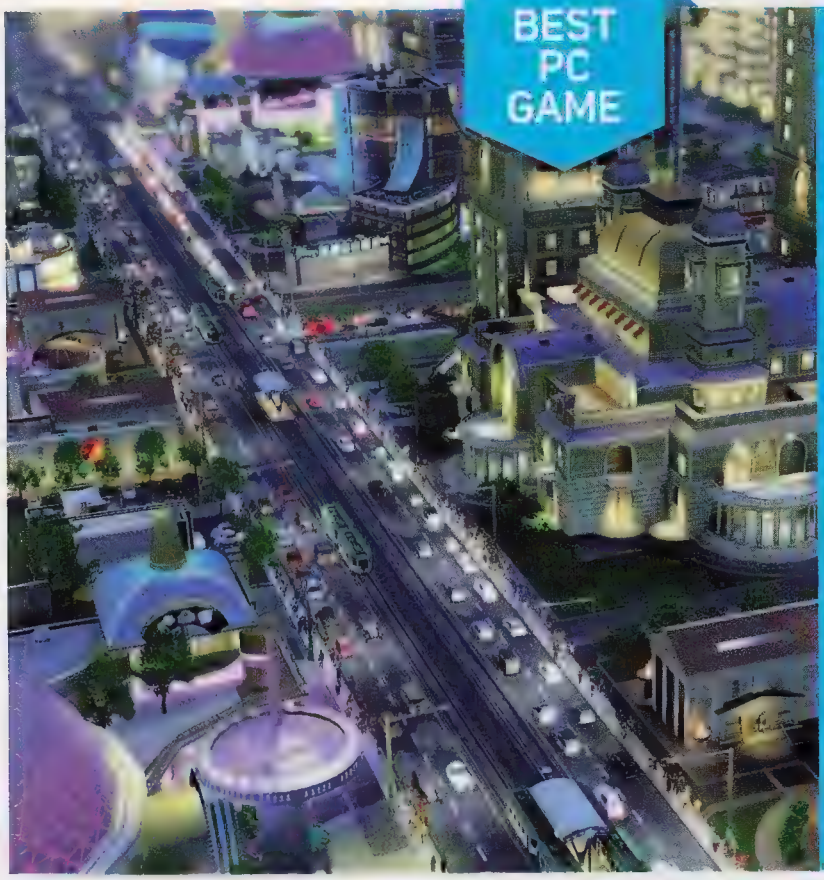
BEST XBOX GAME

Publisher: Microsoft Studios • Developer: Turn 10 • ESRB: Everyone

Microsoft's supremely slick series stole the sim-racing crown away from Gran Turismo in the last generation, so what's left for it to do this time around? Reign above all, if the dazzling Forza Motorsport 5 on Xbox One is any indication. Rather than pursue wild reinvention, Forza 5 is the pinnacle of refinement, putting the new hardware to brilliant use. No doubt, this is one drop-dead gorgeous game, and there's nothing quite like blazing through an old European city from the in-car view, taking in the blurred sights as you clear the pack. But even the competition is better than ever thanks to the Drivatar system, which builds an AI driver based on each player's own tendencies and sends it into others' races. That's seriously smart, and Forza is likewise seriously awesome.

RUNNER-UP: GEARS OF WAR: JUDGMENT

BEST XBOX GAME



SIMCITY

BEST PC GAME

Publisher: Electronic Arts • **Developer:** Maxis • **ESRB:** Everyone 10+

EA's SimCity reboot arrived with grand ambitions—to make the legendary city-creation simulation series bigger and better by doing things simpler and smarter. And despite some early server issues that have thankfully been ironed out, this PC revival succeeded with flying colors. As ever, the game allows you to build out your very own metropolis by plotting buildings and roads and setting a course for your city to prosper, and success is found through intelligent planning and efficient construction. A bevy of brief missions helps you moving ever forward, even if you're not a genre pro or lack an inclination toward real-world urban planning, while the addition of online communities means you're not simply responsible for your own successes and failures, but also the effects of those around you. Dazzlingly presented and impressively accessible despite in-depth elements, SimCity charts a new course for the genre while ably appealing to just about everyone.

RUNNER-UP: STARCRAFT II: HEART OF THE STORM

SUPER MARIO 3D WORLD

BEST WII U GAME

Publisher: Nintendo • **Developer:** Nintendo • **ESRB:** Everyone

Leave it to Mario to set the bar for what an amazing Wii U original should be like. While last year's New Super Mario Bros. U proved it a bit safe, Super Mario 3D World is absolutely bursting with diverse game mechanics and colorful stages, as the new setting of Sprixieland is a wonderland of creative delights. Sure, it takes cues from the also-fantastic Super Mario 3D Land on Nintendo 3DS, but the move to console for this entry has resulted in a much larger and more varied experience. Whether playing solo or cackling the world with local friends in tow, you'll take in an incredible array of levels, power-ups, and diversions—and in typical Mario fashion, nearly everything is super polished and loads of fun. Super Mario 3D World is exactly the kind of game worth owning a Wii U for.

RUNNER-UP: PIKMIN 3

ANIMAL CROSSING: NEW LEAF

BEST PORTABLE GAME

Publisher: Nintendo • Developer: Nintendo/Marvelous AQL • ESRB: Everyone

"Absorbing" barely begins to describe the Animal Crossing: New Leaf, a Nintendo 3DS version of Nintendo's adorable life simulation that pairs [illegible] with some much-appreciated enhancements further cementing its role as the only must-own 3DS [illegible]. New Leaf casts you as the mayor of your particular town, which makes up your actions more [illegible] the game's [illegible] tasks while also [illegible] the experience. But the meat and potatoes of [illegible] is still the same: world domination, [illegible] and just living in this colorful, cartoonish world. [illegible] and it's made all the better via smart tweaks to the interface puts it [illegible] to control. Way Easy. With a massive pool of [illegible] players [illegible] with, New Leaf [illegible] to [illegible] anytime soon. It's a familiar template, but Animal Crossing [illegible] than ever here.

RUNNER-UP: ZELDA: A LINK BETWEEN WORLDS

LOGITECH G710+ KEYBOARD

BEST GEAR

When it comes to serious PC gaming, we often focus so much on having a great mouse that we neglect the fact that a gaming-centric keyboard can do wonders for your performance. If you're still rocking a 'board that came with your computer, then it's time to upgrade—and Logitech's G710+ Mechanical Gaming Keyboard is one of the best we've ever used. It's not overloaded with an LCD display or scads of unnecessary extras. Rather, it's an impeccably designed option that uses Cherry MX Brown switches beneath the keys for a durable build and tactile feedback, with even the macro keys sporting mechanical switches. Each key is independently backlit, and you can even separately manage the brightness for the differently colored WASD keys. Several smart additions and tweaks makes Logitech's G710+ stand out in the crowded field of premium keyboards.

RUNNER-UP: TURTLE BEACH XP EAR FORCE SEVEN HEADSET

BROTHERS: A TALE OF TWO SONS

BEST DOWNLOADABLE GAME

Publisher: 505 Games • Developer: Starbreeze Studios • ESRB: Everyone 10+

We're used to co-op games by now, but what about a game in which one player commands two characters simultaneously? That's the conceit at the core of *Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons*, a charming little adventure that proves surprisingly emotional en route to its gut-punch of a finale. You'll control two brothers at once, with each analog stick and trigger pairing tied to each sibling, with the goal of claiming the Water of Life to heal their ailing father. Both have been recently rocked by tragedy with the death of their mom, and the effects manifest differently in both, which—along with their respective skills—means you'll need to smartly use both to overcome the fantastical challenges that pop up along the way. *Brothers* is brief but memorable, and it's a journey well worth embarking upon.

RUNNER-UP: GONE HOME

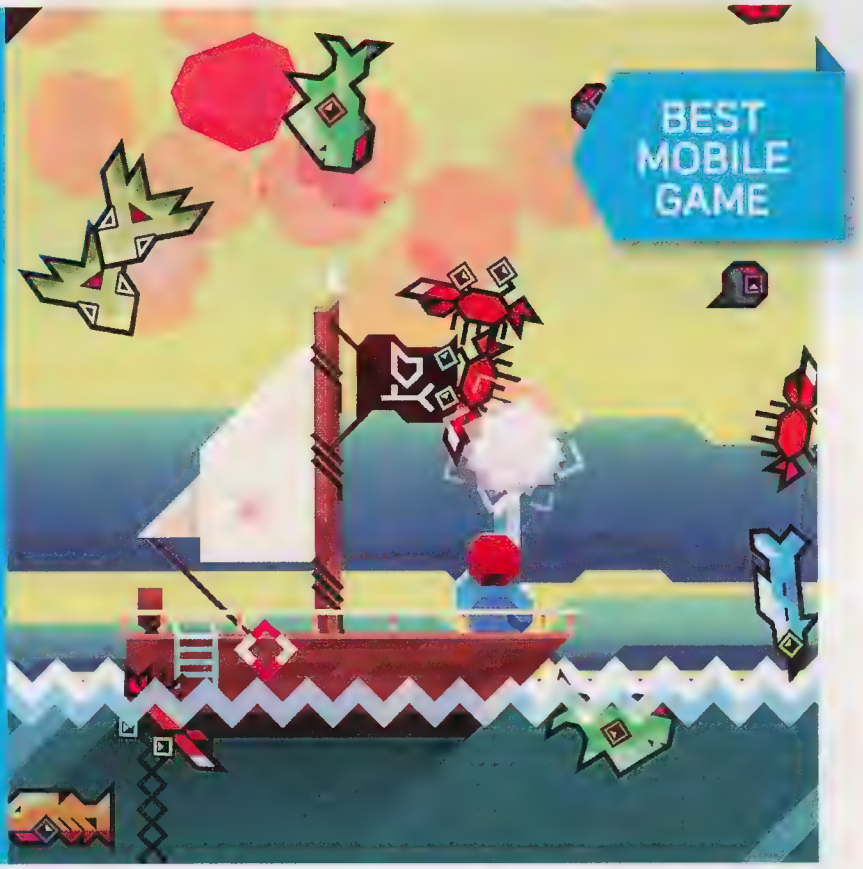
RIDICULOUS FISHING

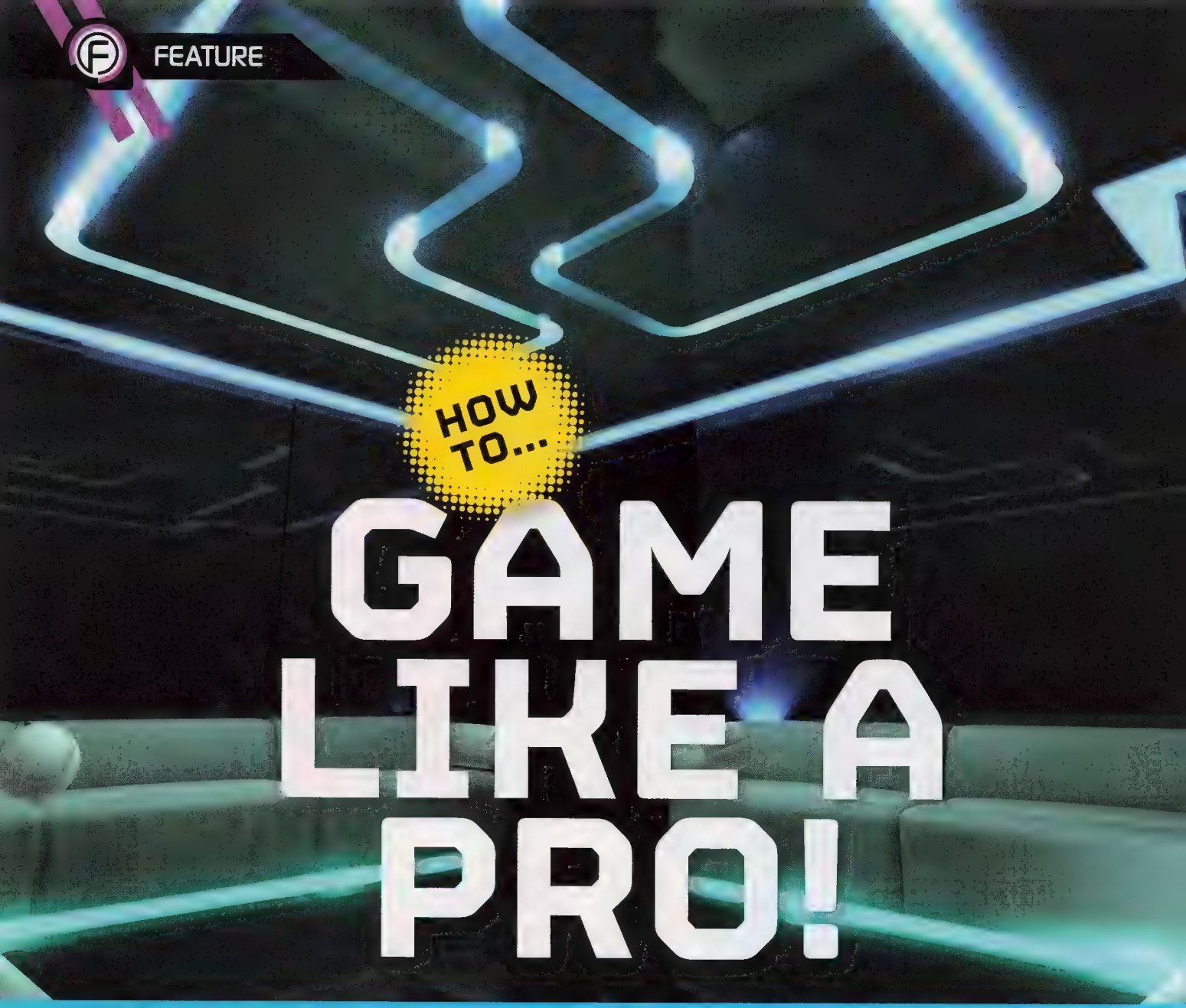
BEST MOBILE GAME

Publisher: Vlambeer • Developer: Vlambeer • ESRB: N/A

An absurd premise and dreamy visuals make *Ridiculous Fishing* stand out, but it's the engaging gameplay and gripping sense of exploration that make it wonderful. In this slick, arcade-style iPhone and iPad game, you must cast a line into the depths below—but the initial goal isn't to catch a fish, but rather to avoid them. Once you do eventually hook one of the skittering beasts, the objective reverses as the line reels upwards, and you're tasked with grabbing as many as possible. As the dozens or more aquatic creatures hit the surface, they spray into the air, giving you precious few moments to pepper them with bullets to earn cash. It's a totally silly concept, but *Ridiculous Fishing* proves captivating thanks to charming presentation, a steady array of fresh items to use, and even a delightful story hook.

RUNNER-UP: XCOM: ENEMY UNKNOWN





HOW TO...

GAME LIKE A PRO!

Learn how to become a professional gamer with tips from the pros

• Words: Alex Rubens

The professional gaming scene has made massive leaps in size and maturity over the last few years, growing exponentially in viewership and prize money. It's grown to the point where gaming is finally a viable career option for some of the world's best players—and if you're lucky, you.

Major League Gaming (and eSports in general) are growing in accessibility—for both players and viewers—on all fronts thanks to sites like Twitch.tv and YouTube, and it's quickly becoming a global community in itself. The scene has gotten so big that they even held the League of Legends LCS Season 3 Championship in the Staples Center, where the Los Angeles Lakers play. Situations like this were unheard of just a few years ago, but they're now becoming common throughout the industry, likely due to a concerted effort by developers to build competitive features directly into their titles.

Games like *League of Legends*, *StarCraft II*, and *Call of Duty: Black Ops 2* come equipped with competitive leagues built-in, enabling better engagement in the competitive scene without the need for an alternative service. But what does that mean exactly? It means the average player has nearly direct access to professionals should they make their way up to a high enough tier and, despite the overwhelming interest in the scene, it's easier than ever to get noticed.

However, if you're new to the scene, it can be somewhat confusing to figure out how to actually get involved. You might have the skills, for example, but don't know where to start interacting with other players to get yourself noticed. That's where we come in.

We talked to some of the world's best competitive gamers to find out how you too can game like a pro.

SIX STEPS TO GO FROM ZERO TO PRO-GAME HERO

1

FIND YOUR PERFECT GAME

When you're looking for the perfect game to show off your competitive abilities, it's easy to go with what you know. But that might not always be the right call. If you play *Super Street Fighter IV*, but find that you aren't good enough to play competitively, try your hand at *Injustice*. It's worth trying a few different games that suit your style. Who knows, it might just be the game you've been waiting for.

2

MAKE SURE YOU HAVE THE RIGHT EQUIPTMENT

As much of a bummer as it might be, you need to spend the money on proper equipment if you're going to have a shot at going pro. For some games, your general equipment might not matter much, but for fighting and strategy games, top-notch tech is a necessity. We've taken the liberty of outlining our essential pieces of gear on pg. 57, so be sure to take a look.

3

PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE

It might seem somewhat obvious, but if you want to be a professional gamer, you're going to need to practice. This only amplifies the importance of choosing a game you love. You're going to need to be willing to spend hours upon hours of your day practicing, even when it doesn't feel fun anymore. Remember, treat it like a job.

4

GO TO LOCAL TOURNAMENTS FOR EXPERIENCE

As helpful as online competitive modes like League Play might be, they don't prepare you for the emotions you'll feel at a live tournament. Not only will live competition help you to stay cool under pressure, but it'll introduce you to the intensity that comes from sitting side-by-side with your competition. More importantly, it's the best way to impress teams looking to pick someone up.

5

STAY ACTIVE ON SOCIAL NETWORKS

With so much importance placed on practicing and competing in tournaments, it can be easy to forget the simple things like communicating with fans and other players online. Twitter is a valuable tool for creating a fan base that, while it won't win you any matches, will make you a more valuable asset to any gaming organization. Plus, without an audience of adoring fans what's the point?

6

NEVER GIVE UP, NEVER SURRENDER

Listen, we all lose a match every once in a while, but it's how you react to that loss and continue anyway that will make you a great player. Even the best players lose a tournament or two, but that doesn't mean that it's time to give up. It can be easy to get frustrated and want to quit, but countless players have struck back from a devastating loss to go on to become world champions.

HOW TO...

BE A PRO FIRST-PERSON SHOOTER PLAYER

CALL OF DUTY: BLACK OPS II

In competitive *Call of Duty*, it's all about placing consistently in the top spots.

"I think all competitive gamers know that they're not going to win every event, but to be considered a top team or top competitor at every event is the ultimate goal," says pro *Call of Duty* player Joe "Merk" Deluca of Team EnVyUs.

To do this, it's all about dedication. You have to be willing to put in the time. It's a professional sport and the top players treat it as such. "We have to be as constant as possible," says Merk, "and that takes a lot of hard work."

When looking at the differences between a professional player and an amateur, it comes down to skills outside of the shooting aspect. Inexperienced players might try to kill everything they see without recognizing the whole situation first, and this doesn't do anything to prove their worth as a team player.

Merk specifically cites knowledge of spawn placement, minimap utilization, and team rotations as key factors that set pros apart from the rest.

Communication and map awareness are essential, he says, and show that you can play for the team, not just for yourself. Merk believes that growth in the number of events has made it easier than ever for new players to get noticed. Even above getting noticed, just playing against professional players will make you a better player overall. Lastly, he says to find teammates and make sure you're friends outside of the game.

His advice: "If you're good friends outside of the game, that's going to work inside of the game."

TIP FROM THE PRO

Having a good attitude both in-game and in real life is essential to a successful team, as you want to stay positive at all times, even when you're losing. Most of all, it portrays a good image for your team.

ALSO TRY...

CALL OF DUTY: GHOSTS

Ghosts **plays completely differently than last year's *Black Ops 2*, so practice those knee slides.**

BATTLEFIELD 4

Vehicles make all the difference in *Battlefield 4*, so get ready to use those choppers for flag runs.

HOW TO...

BE A PRO MOBA PLAYER

DEFENSE OF THE ANCIENTS 2

DOTA 2 is likely the most difficult game to go professional in, at least according to Jonathan "Loda" Berg, team captain of Alliance.

"DOTA has been around for [several] years now. It was new when I started, so people didn't know everything," Loda told me.

But for that reason alone, DOTA 2 requires you to know a good deal about the game if you ever want to compete on a professional level.

Loda's advice is to start a team, even if it isn't one that you're necessarily happy with, and play in as many tournaments as you can. If you're as good as you think you are, showing your face and proving that fact is a necessity. That's a claim supported not only by Loda, but by many of the pro players who got their start playing local tournaments.

"If you're good, hopefully people will notice you and invite you to play a couple public games," says Berg.

While it might be easier than ever to make a living as a pro player, it's extremely hard to get to that level where you can compete regularly. It isn't impossible, though. In fact, one of Berg's teammates, AdmiralBulldog, was a public player just one year ago. He became extremely good with one Hero and was noticed by another pro, Dendi.

"DOTA play is very much about experience," says Berg. You need to be dedicated to practicing every day. You'll need to practice if you're going to be confident in your own skills. And most importantly of all, when you finally make it, be humble.

TIP FROM THE PRO

In *DOTA 2*, become extremely good with one Hero character. If you can do that, it shows that you have the hypothetical skills and dedication to do it at a professional level.

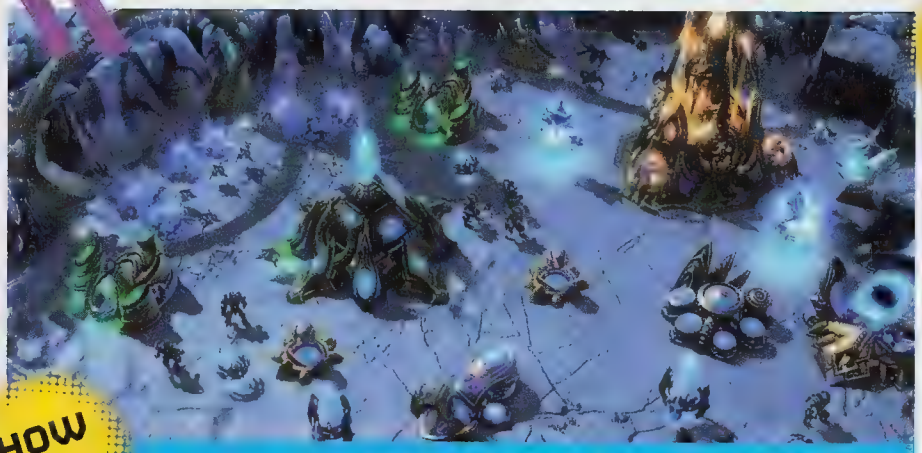
ALSO TRY...

LEAGUE OF LEGENDS

Even more popular than *DOTA 2*, *LoL* is another extremely prominent option in the MOBA category.

INFINITE CRISIS

If graphic novels are more your thing, then *Infinite Crisis* is worth a shot. It's never been cooler to play as your favorite superhero.



HOW TO...

BE A PRO STRATEGY GAME PLAYER

STARCRAFT II

If you're looking to try your hand at going pro in the hyper-competitive world of *StarCraft II*, there are a few things you'll have to know before starting.

First, you have to be willing to practice. SC2 isn't forgiving for casual players. You need to study the game.

"You need to make decisions like a poker player and have the strategy of a master chess player," says Geoff Robinson, team captain of Evil Geniuses' *StarCraft II* team. It requires time and training, sometimes demanding 8–10 hours of your day. It can be a challenge, but it's also necessary. Remember, your competition is doing it, even if you aren't.

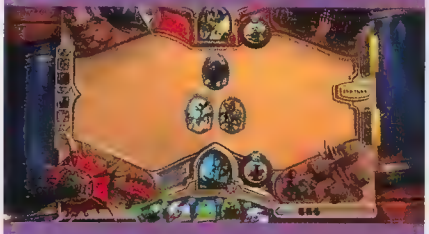
TIP FROM THE PRO

Work on speeding up your APM (Actions Per Minute) in-game, as that's what pro *StarCraft II* teams measure and look for.

ALSO TRY...

XCOM: ENEMY UNKNOWN

While it never made it to the competitive scene, *XCOM* will teach you to make tough decisions on the fly.



HEARTHSTONE: HEROES OF WARCRAFT

It may not be your typical strategy game, but *Hearthstone* is something different that should pique your interest enough to look past that it's a digital collectible card game.

HOW TO...

BE A PRO FIGHTING GAME PLAYER

SUPER STREET FIGHTER IV

For fighting game fanatics it's all about winning. It doesn't matter if it's a tournament at the local pizza shop, it counts. Why? According to pro fighting game expert Mike Ross, "it builds confidence and feels good knowing that you're good enough to win something."

It's the best way to gain recognition, and get people's notice. From there, hone your skills. Doing so requires determination, which Ross considers to be the only prerequisite for success. "Set goals for yourself and try to achieve them," he says. For him, that's the best way to see results and enjoy your time in the competitive fighting game community.

TIP FROM THE PRO

Check out fighting game fan sites like Shoryuken.com to help you find other local players in the scene.

ALSO TRY...

ULTIMATE MARVEL VS. CAPCOM 3

Play *Ultimate Marvel vs. Capcom 3* to improve your combo skills.

INJUSTICE: GODS AMONG US

Capcom fighters too competitive to break into? Try *Injustice* instead.

GEAR YOU ARE GOING TO NEED

RAZER BLACK-WIDOW ULTIMATE GAMING KEYBOARD

When it comes to gaming keyboards, Razer's 2013 BlackWidow Ultimate Gaming Keyboard is just about the best you can get. It's fully mechanical, which is extremely useful when one missed key press can cost you a life or, even worse, a game. Best of all, it's engineered for comfort, so it will help minimize hand and wrist pain during those long practice sessions.

STEELSERIES SENSEI [RAW] GAMING MOUSE

Sometimes you need no-frills gear that simply performs the way you need it to each and every time. That's exactly what Steelseries' Sensei RAW gaming mouse does. It's simple, but sturdy enough to handle any job. Even better, it's one of the best gaming mice out there if you're left handed and don't want to lose performance by using a right-handed mouse.

GUNNAR OPTIKS PHANTOM ONYX GAMING EYEWEAR

Sitting in front of a bright computer monitor all day isn't exactly the best for your eyes, but thankfully, Gunnar Optiks are there to help protect your eyes from strain during long practice sessions. The yellow tint of the lenses allows for better screen contrast, making it easier to see details where you normally wouldn't be able to.

MLG PRO CIRCUIT CONTROLLER

Officially licensed by Major League Gaming and available in whatever color scheme you can cook up, the MLG Pro Circuit Controller goes far above what the standard controller can provide. Its ProModule system allows you to swap out the inputs and move them around, and you can even add spacers or different caps to the analog sticks that allow for customization to fit your style.

ASTRO GAMING A40 AUDIO SYSTEM

If you're looking for the best headset to use in competitive gaming, there's no better option than Astro Gaming's A40 Audio System. It's wired, so you don't have to worry about batteries running out, and it plugs directly into a mixamp that gives direct control over both game and chat volumes. Plus, the A40's build quality is outstanding and holds up well to travel's wear and tear.

ELGATO GAME CAPTURE HD

These days, one of most important parts of being a competitive gamer is having a following. Streaming on sites like Twitch.tv is one of the best ways to grow a fan base, and the Elgato Game Capture HD makes it painless. It's plug-and-stream and doesn't require any additional software. Best of all, it's easy to transport and take on the go, so you can stream and capture wherever you go.

CREATIVE

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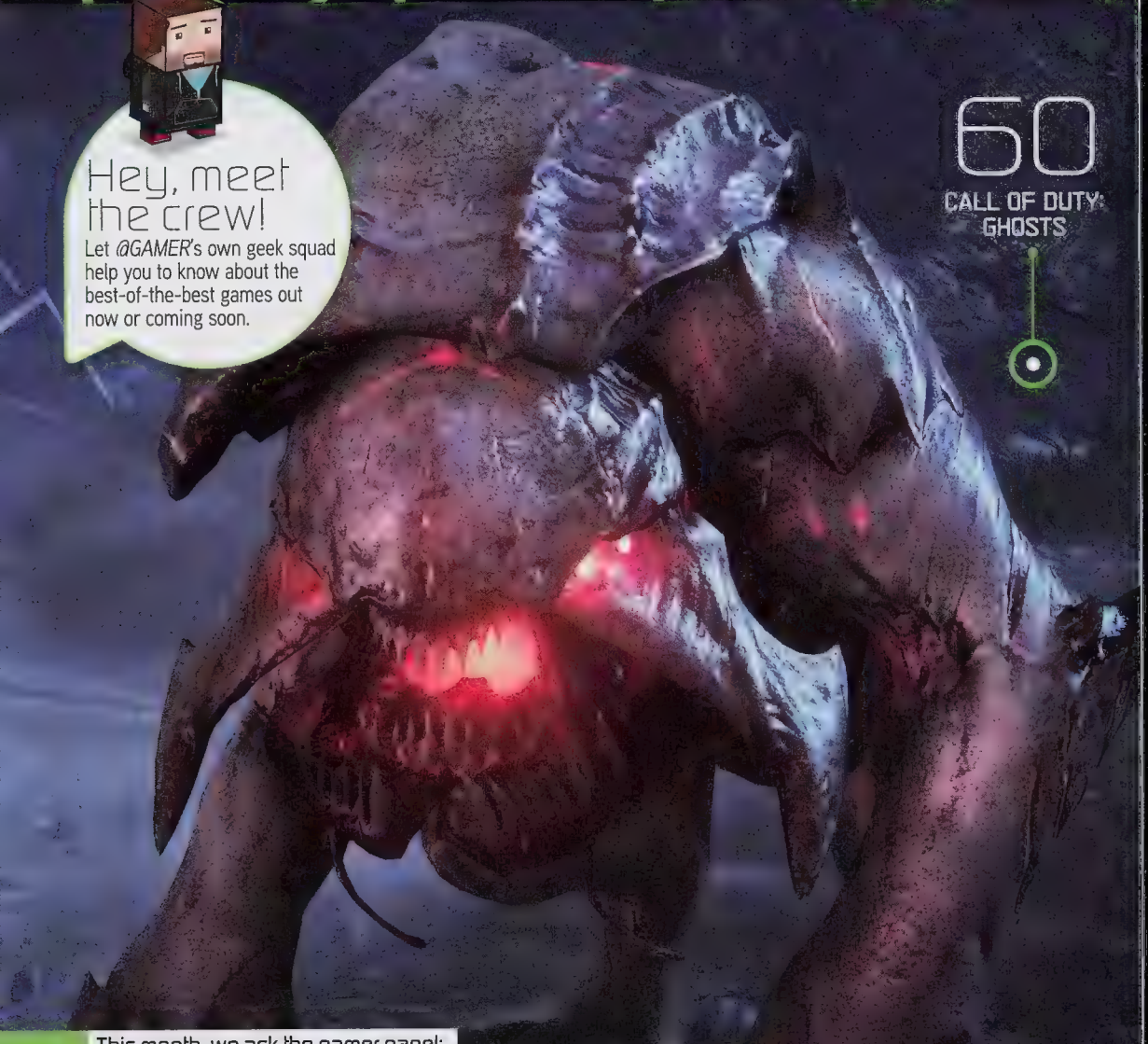
TOP PICKS

Hey, meet the crew!

Let *@GAMER*'s own geek squad help you to know about the best-of-the-best games out now or coming soon.



60
CALL OF DUTY: GHOSTS

This month, we ask the gamer panel:

If Santa were secretly a gamer, what would he play?

Nick Pino

Santa would be into *Cookie Clicker*. Let's be honest. He's busy one night a year—which leaves 364 days for non-stop clicking. Plus, as we know, the guy's got a thing for cookies.

Andrew Hayward

Santa's big on spreading joy, so I assume he plays *LittleBigPlanet*. It lets him share happiness through created stages and he can even dress up Sackboy as himself!

Mikel Reparaz

Animal Crossing: New Leaf! Seeing as his existence is based around giving gifts, it stands to reason that his escape would be a game where he receives them constantly.

Hollander Cooper

What? That's a silly question. Santa doesn't play games—he makes them. I believe he's working on *Beyond Good & Evil 2*, *Half-Life 3*, and *The Last Guardian* right now.

TOP PICKS

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83 Zumba Fitness World Party

NOT PICKS

There weren't any games that didn't make the @GAMER cut this issue!

Gender Equity
For the first time, CoD features female soldiers.

CALL OF DUTY: GHOSTS

Make like Casper in a seriously rattled America • Words: Paul Semel

Years after intentionally triggered earthquakes crippled the United States, it's up to two brothers in the remainder of the nation's special ops forces to ensure the nation's enemies don't take advantage of its weakened state. And so begins *Ghosts*, the first truly new *Call of Duty* saga since 2008's *World at War*.

This post-disaster scenario isn't just window dressing, though. Whether you play the campaign, the multiplayer, or the co-op modes, you'll have to contend with aftershocks, collapsing structures, and even enemies who aren't in the military.

Of course, *Ghosts* has the usual yearly additions and improvements. The biggest of these come in multiplayer, which has a new customization system as well as such addictive new modes as the Team Deathmatch-esque "Hunted," in which you start with a pistol but randomly find better weapons in supply drops, and "Grind," which is the same as Kill Confirmed except you have to carry dog tags to a goal.

If you prefer cooperation to competition, however, *Ghosts* has fun and frantic co-op modes like the Horde-esque "Safe Guard," as well as "Extinction," which swaps the undead in *Black Ops II*'s Zombies mode for animal-like aliens.

Thankfully, none of this heralds a complete reinvention. Regardless of what mode you play and what system you play this on, *Ghosts* offers all the smooth controls, harrowing firefights in interesting places (including a wobbly but invigorating train ride), and cinematic moments you expect from the series. (Sadly, this also means the single-player campaign is rather short.) In the end, *Ghosts* delivers exactly what you'd hope, and I'm sure you'll have lots of fun confirming that for yourself.

Alien Nation
In the co-op mode Extinction, you stop alien invaders.

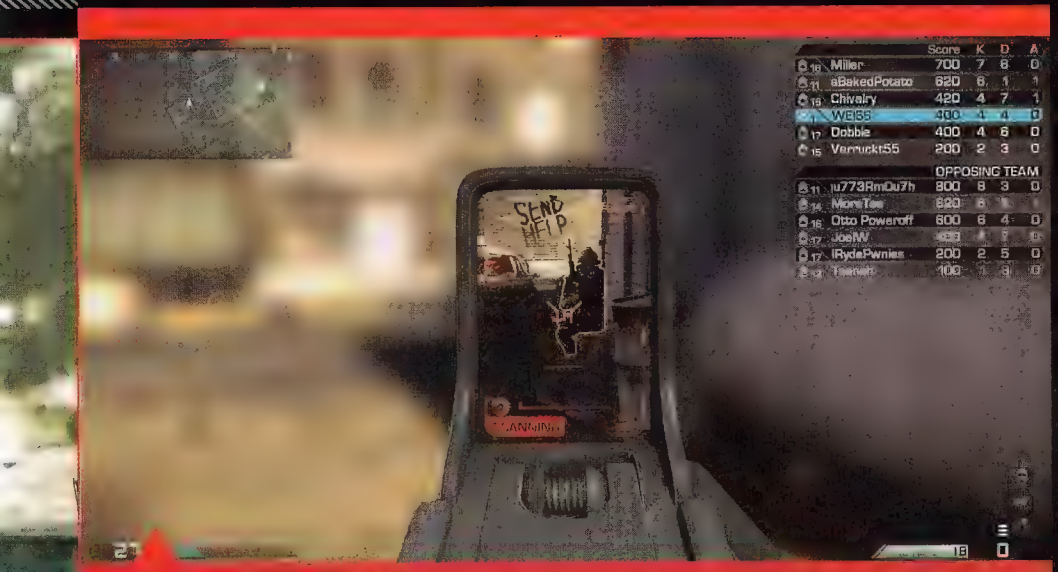
▼ In one of the campaign's cooler moments, you go full Spider-Man.

THE NEXT GENERATION

With Ghosts being a launch title on both the Xbox One and PlayStation 4, the inevitable question is how those editions compare to the ones on Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3. Visually, the next-gen versions have a lot more detail, with smoother edges and better animations. The PlayStation 4 game also benefits from having a much better controller than on PlayStation 3. But ultimately, where it really counts, the games play the same, with the same campaign, multiplayer, and co-op modes.

SPACE...THE FILMIC FRONTIER
While this space scene isn't a ref to the recent film Gravity, Ghosts does have some movie moments, including nods to Star Wars, The Dark Knight Rises, and a James Bond flick to be named later.

ALTER EGO
In the campaign, your brother is voiced by Superman Returns star Brandon Routh. So, you know, no pressure trying to keep up with him.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Otto Poweroff 600 6 4 0
JoeIW 400 4 7 0
IRydePwnies 200 2 5 0
SEND HELP

CRANK YANKERS \\ In multiplayer, the most challenging new mode is "Cranked," which rewards you for killing someone by starting a countdown timer. If you quickly kill someone else, the timer starts over, no worries. But if you fail to nail anyone before it runs down, you explode (which, ironically, may end up killing someone). While this nerve-wracking mode keeps everyone on the hunt, and thus discourages camping and sniping, the rather short timer makes it so we'd be more likely to play it were we any good at the game. Or at least liked to go "boom."

▼ Yes, that is black ice, and yes, it is very slippery.

GAME DETAILS

CALL OF DUTY: GHOST

INFO
Publisher: Activision
Developer: Infinity Ward
Platforms: PS4, Xbox One, Wii U, PS3, Xbox 360, PC
Reviewed On: PS4, Xbox One, Xbox 360

RELEASE DATE
November 5, 2013

MULTIPLAYER/ONLINE
18-player online competitive, 4-player co-op

GENRE
First-person shooter

WHAT'S GREAT:
- ❤ Has all the classic series hallmarks
- ❤ Post-disaster setting informs all modes
- ❤ Engaging new multiplayer and co-op modes

WHAT'S NOT SO GREAT:
- ✖ Campaign is still too dang short

NICK SAYS:
After barely changing the series in *MW3*, I'm glad to see Infinity Ward has rekindled its drive to innovate.

OVERALL RATING:

4.5

ASSASSIN'S CREED IV BLACK FLAG

Yo ho, yo ho, a pirate's life for you!

• Words: Hollander Cooper

Edward Kenway's a pirate first, Assassin second, and that's a pretty good way to describe *Assassin's Creed IV Black Flag*, too. Though it wears the clothes of an Assassin, uses the weapons of an Assassin, and even talks like an Assassin, it's a pirate game, through and through. Sure, about half of the game takes place on the sandy beaches of Kingston, Havana, and Nassau—and when it's landlocked, it plays pretty much identically to the *Assassin's Creed* games of yore—but *Black Flag* really opens up whenever you're sailing the high seas.

There, you're able to engage in remarkable sea battles (seriously, they're so good) as you explore an absolutely massive open world full of buried treasures to dig up, animals to hunt, and secrets to find as Edward chases fortune and a mysterious "Observatory." Edward's disinterest and ignorance of *Assassin's Creed*'s usual tropes keeps the story fresh, though it does eventually bog down in jargon about Templars and Assassins.

Whereas *Assassin's Creed III* felt overwrought with bloat and useless features, *Black Flag* does a remarkable job of making sure that each mechanic has a real, tangible implication. The open world is a symphony of chaos, but once you're crafting holsters with the skin of an iguana you killed and upgrading your cannons with the metal you looted it all seems to make sense. Every action has a reward, making for one of the best *Assassin's Creed* games yet.

BLACK FLAG REALLY OPENS UP WHEN YOU'RE SAILING THE SEAS

▶ Why use wrist blades when you can whip out two swords?

VERY BAD EGGS \\

You'll interact with plenty of historical figures, but don't expect them to be as recognizable as the likes of George Washington or Sam Adams. That said, you'll still run into some piratical characters you can't help but have heard of.

01 FRIEND?
Assassin's Creed IV does a great job of getting you to question who is really on your side...

02 ...OR FOE?
Pirates aren't known for being the most honest bunch, are they? Expect to be backstabbed.

◀ Crafting new holsters and items makes hunting animals worthwhile.

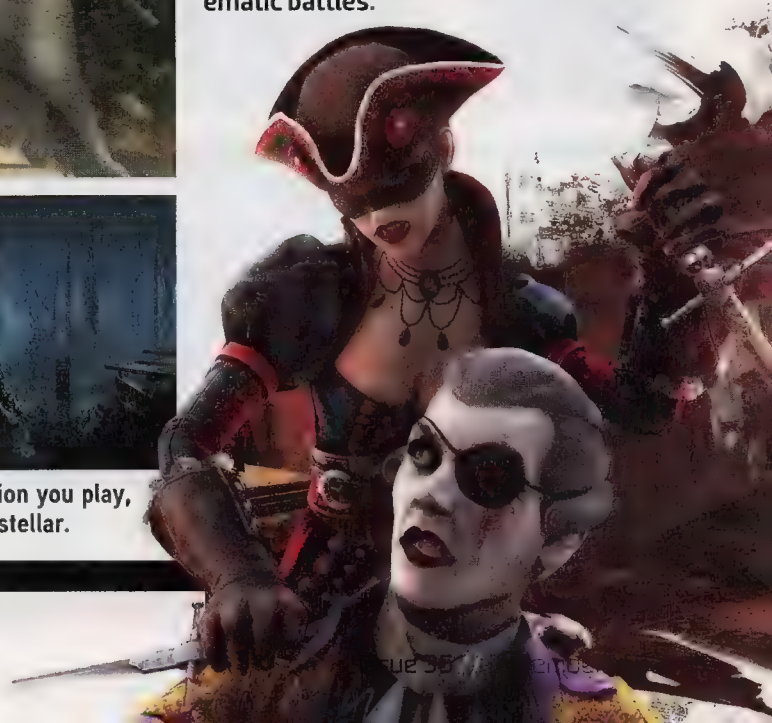
▲ Other than cities, the entire world is open to explore without loading.

▲ No matter which version you play, *AC4* looks absolutely stellar.

BLOOD ON THE SAND \\

JUST A BLADE IN THE SEA \\

Though Edward doesn't have as many weapons at his disposal as some past AC heroes, he's still able to destroy his foes in clever, entertaining ways. The combat is as good as ever, and being able to carry multiple pistols (to fire at multiple enemies) makes for epic, cinematic battles.



FRIENDLY FACES \\

CALICO JACK \\

Jack is *Black Flag*'s closest analogue to *Pirates of the Caribbean*'s Jack Sparrow.

BLACKBEARD \\

This version of Blackbeard dances the line between history and fiction, but is an awesome character.

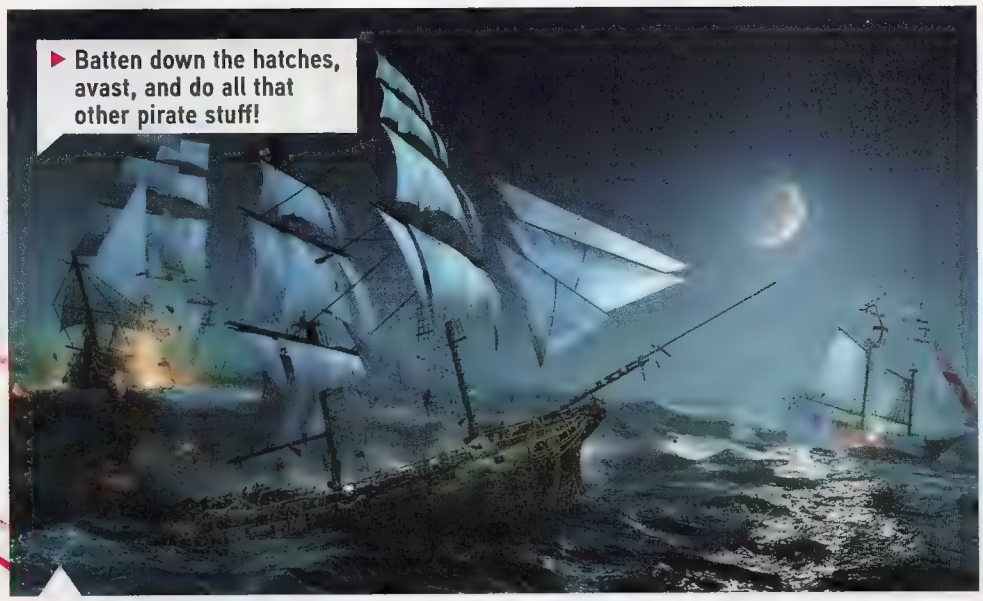
ADÉWALÉ \\

Edward's first mate, Adéwalé, is actually going to star in the game's upcoming "Freedom Cry" DLC.

Odds are he isn't going to have time to open that treasure chest.

MULTIPLAYER \\

The competitive and cooperative sides of *Assassin's Creed IV* aren't huge departures from what was found in previous games, bringing back both the team-based battles and the engaging Wolfpack modes. The biggest change comes with the ability to customize matches in the "Game Lab," adding replayability to the already-addicting gameplay.



Batten down the hatches, avast, and do all that other pirate stuff!

ANCHORS UP \\

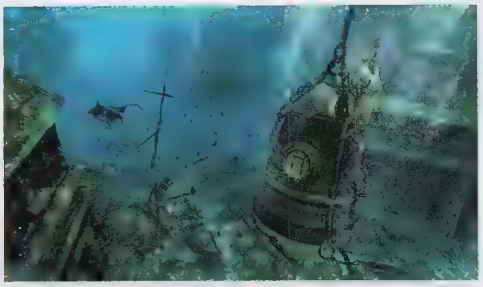
The ship combat in *Black Flag* is remarkable. You'll be sailing around, minding your own business, when suddenly you spot a group of ships with booty you want to lift. As you fire cannons at them a storm rolls in, complete with pouring rain and cyclones you need to dodge. The best part? Once the ships are weakened you can sail up and board the scallywags—it all works together so well.

OH, THE PLACES YOU'LL GO \\

▲ Money can be used to upgrade Edward's ship, the Jackdaw.

▲ Exploring ruins and jungles makes the land-based segments stand out.

▲ Combat is just as bloody as ever—this game definitely isn't for the squeamish.



▲ The world is packed with stuff to do, from diving to harpooning whales.

PS4 XBOX ONE Wii U
PS3 XBOX 360 PC

GAME DETAILS

ASSASSIN'S CREED IV BLACK FLAG

INFO
Publisher: Ubisoft
Developer: Ubisoft
Platform: PS4, Xbox One, Wii U, PS3, Xbox 360, PC
Reviewed on: PS3

RELEASE DATE
October 29, 2013

MULTIPLAYER/ONLINE
Up to 8-player competitive, 4-player co-op

GENRE
Action

WHAT'S GREAT:
- ❤ Fun characters and an interesting story
- ❤ The modern-day elements are surprising
- ❤ Strong world filled with engaging stuff to do

WHAT'S NOT SO GREAT:
- ✖ Narrative stumbles
- ✖ Far too many "tail this guy around" missions

CHARLIE SAYS:
This is the first must-play *Assassin's Creed* game since we originally met Ezio back in 2009.

OVERALL RATING:

4.5

SUPER MARIO 3D WORLD

GAME OF THE MONTH

Platforming brilliance fit for a plumber

Words: Chris Hoffman

Wii U owners, this is the game you've been waiting for. Sure, there have been other great games on the system, but *Super Mario 3D World* has it all—it's a totally original platforming adventure that's overflowing with the creativity, excitement, challenge, and fun that defines what Nintendo is all about.

The game is nothing if not diverse. Not only can you initially select from four playable characters (Mario, Luigi, Toad, and Princess Peach) with distinct speed and jumping capabilities, but you're given a broad move set that offers wall bounces, spin jumps, rolling attacks, and more. The action goes beyond running and jumping, though; after nabbing a few of those great *Mario* power-ups, you'll be shooting fire, tossing boomerangs, climbing walls, and executing spinning tail attacks.

It's the levels, however, that really bring the fun. At first the realm of Sprixieland—complete with rolling green hills, underground caverns, and lava-filled castles—seems a lot like the Mushroom Kingdom, but it doesn't take long to discover that this is one of the most unique Mario games in years; you'll find yourself traversing a vast savannah, speeding through a level inspired by *Mario Kart*, visiting a Japanese pagoda, exploring a wrecked pirate ship, and hitching a ride on Bowser's train, to name a few. While the levels are fairly straightforward and focused, there's plenty of room for exploration so you can uncover hidden secrets—it's a solid middle ground between the *Super Mario Galaxy* series and *New Super Mario Bros. U*.

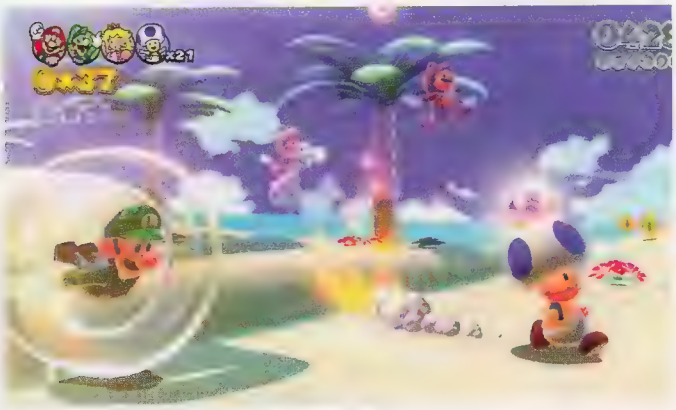
Furthermore, the game looks fantastic, controls beautifully, and offers a ton of replay value, plus it can be a lot of fun in multiplayer mode. On the negative side, some of the tunes sound like cheesy game-show music, and the action doesn't feel quite as innovative as it did in the *Galaxy* titles. Even so, this is the game that will make you glad to own a Wii U.

▼ Only Mario and friends can rescue the Sprixies from the evil Bowser.

▲ The ferocious Cat Suit hard to called the purr-fect power-up.

THE MORE THE MERRIER? \\

Super Mario 3D World can be enjoyed in its entirety either as a single-player experience or in local drop-in-drop-out co-op mode for up to four players. Thanks to the third dimension, multiplayer works much better than it did in the New Super Mario Bros. games, but it can still get pretty chaotic, especially in four-player mode. If you bring along an ally or two, though, and work in sync with your teammates, multiplayer can be an absolute blast.



▲ Wide-open levels allow you to team up with your friends without constantly getting in each other's way.

GO FOR THE GREEN! \\

▲ YO, BRO!
Luigi isn't quite as fast as Mario, but his high-jumping skills surpass even those of his iconic brother.

ROADMAP TO SUCCESS \\

New to Super Mario 3D World is a more expansive world map. You're no longer restricted to narrow pathways that move you from point to point; you now have free run of the entire map, where you can bash blocks, collect coins, and track down extra lives. There isn't a ton to find off the beaten path, but if you look around you'll be able to find a few secret areas that lead to extra power-ups or bonus enemy encounters. Though it's not quite revolutionary, the more open-ended map is a nice touch.

▲ In between levels, you're free to explore the world map to earn extra coins and discover secret areas.

▲ COLD COMFORT \\

01
Go through the red ring, then collect the coins that appear to earn a bonus item.

02
As always, you can bash the ? Blocks to get coins or power-ups.

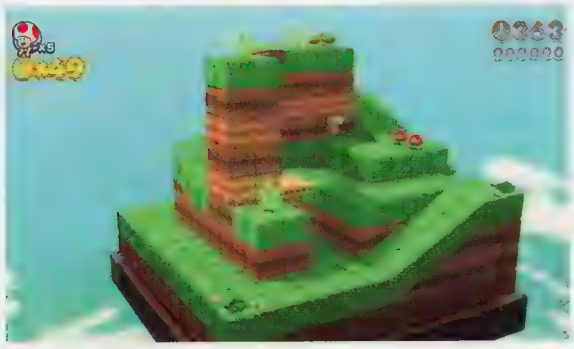
03
Yumbo's Shop says homage in the NES Classic Super Mario Bros. 3!

▲ TOADALLY AWESOME
Toad, Princess Peach's loyal retainer, is back in action. He's the speediest character in the game, but the weakest jumper.

▲ Put an end to this creepy Dimmer shadow to earn a hidden star.

EXTRA CREDIT \\

There's more to Super Mario 3D World than simply getting to the end of each level. Within each stage are collectible stamps and green stars (usually three per stage), and they're often hidden in out-of-the-way places that require you to put your skills to the test if you want to find them all. The stars are also required to unlock the game's advanced levels. Furthermore, there's a wealth of bonus content that becomes available only after the credits roll. You'll find hidden levels containing some of the game's toughest challenges, as well as an unlockable secret character.



MIXING IT UP \\

In addition to traditional platforming, you'll occasionally encounter different types of gameplay. Captain Toad levels are puzzle-focused stages, while Mystery Houses are timed levels that test out specific sets of skills. Both are great chances to earn extra stars.

GAME DETAILS

SUPER MARIO 3D WORLD

INFO
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: Nintendo
Platform: Wii U

RELEASE DATE
November 22, 2013

MULTIPLAYER/ONLINE
Local 4-player co-op; online ghost data and message sharing

GENRE
Platformer

REVIEW

WHAT'S GREAT:
- Brilliant, fun, imaginative level design
- Cool variety of abilities and power-ups
- Tons of replay value

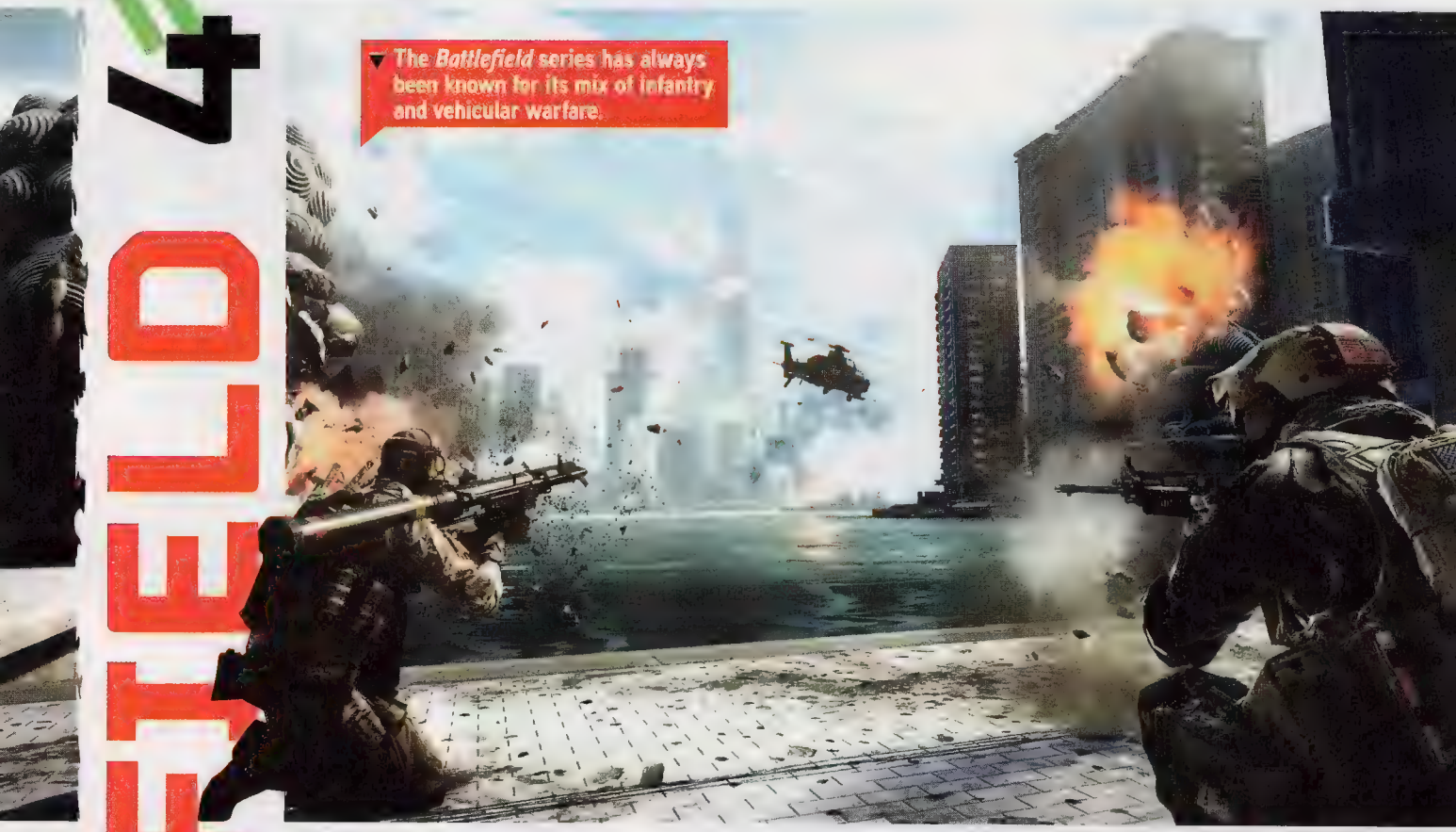
WHAT'S NOT SO GREAT:
- Usually too chaotic in 4-player mode
- Some music is unappealing

CHARLIE SAYS:
New *Super Mario Bros. U* was quite good, but *Super Mario 3D World* is better in every possible way.

OVERALL RATING:

4.75

BATTLEFIELD 4



The *Battlefield* series has always been known for its mix of infantry and vehicular warfare.

Love at first shot • Words: Ryan Taljonick

Suppressive fire from a light machine gun has me pinned down atop the tallest skyscraper in the city; I'm sweating bullets as fast as I'm shooting them. I, along with a handful of teammates, am trying to secure a crucial capture point. The walls behind which I'm taking cover crumble under the assault of enemy fire. Down below, player-piloted tanks hurl massive shells at everything that moves; soldiers blast each other to bits. And up here, on the roof of this skyscraper, death is surely coming.

Just then, a helicopter packed with friendly reinforcements flies up to save us, its 50mm mini guns making short work of my enemies. With the capture point secure, our team finally has much-needed map control—until the skyscrapers supports give way. I jump from the towering rooftop, deploy my parachute, and turn just in time to see the skyscraper crumble to the streets below in a glorious display of virtual destruction that drastically changes the layout of the map for the duration of the match.

Staggering moments like this happen in almost every match of *Battlefield 4*, a first-person shooter whose multiplayer is its greatest selling point. Almost every map in the game has a spectacular "levolution" event, like the destructible skyscraper, that's just as incredible to behold after 15 hours of play as it is the first time you see it.

Battlefield 4, like its predecessors, is very much a team-based game, and its various modes do a great job of facilitating cooperative play. Rush and Conquest are as addictive as ever, and a new mode called Obliteration, in which two teams must fight for control over a single bomb and detonate it, is equally as enjoyable. Defuse, a one-death 5v5 mode, however, doesn't quite belong thanks to its focus on twitch shooting instead of excelling at a specialized class role. No matter what mode you play, though, expect to encounter a few bugs, which hamper the experience a bit.

Once future patches iron these out, *Battlefield 4* will undoubtedly be one of the best multiplayer shooters ever created. Its levels offer a wonderful mix of vehicular and infantry combat, the levolution events are incredible, and a ludicrous amount of unlockables and customization options will keep you eager to play for hours on end.

BATTLEFIELD 4 WILL BE ONE OF THE BEST MULTIPLAYER SHOOTERS EVER CREATED

PS4 XBOX ONE PS3
XBOX 360 PC

7 GAME DETAILS

MATURE 17+
M
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

BATTLEFIELD 4

INFO
Publisher: Electronic Arts
Developer: DICE
Platforms: PS4, Xbox One, PS3, Xbox 360, PC
Reviewed on: PC

RELEASE DATE
October 29, 2013

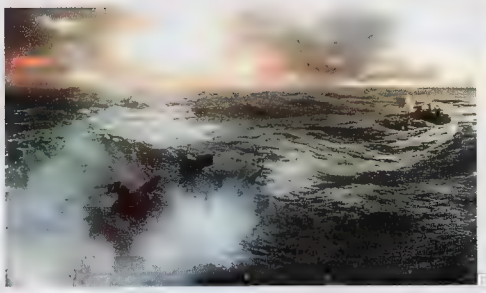
MULTIPLAYER/ONLINE
Up to 64-player online

GENRE
First-person shooter

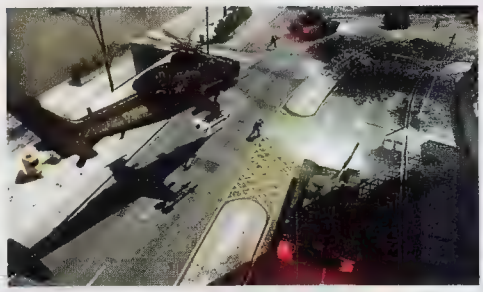
THE CAMPAIGN \\

BF4's single-player offering is a significant improvement over *BF3*'s. Its characters have a decent amount of personality and are almost comparable to those of the *Bad Company* games, even if the story's a bit nonsensical. The mission design is much better, too, as levels often incorporate the best elements of multiplayer: namely sweeping maps in which you can control numerous vehicles, and destructible environments. Still, the narrative's melodrama often feels too forced, and missions tend to end quite abruptly.

▲ Meet squad mates Irish and Hannah, who don't exactly see eye to eye most of the time.



▲ *Battlefield 4* has a lot more opportunities for naval warfare than did previous games.



▲ Plan on piloting an aircraft? Better practice your evasive maneuvering skills.

COMMANDER MODE \\

Battlefield 4's Commander mode is a fun addition that allows one player to view an ongoing match from a birds-eye view. As commander, you issue attack orders for your team, and help them out by deploying ammo crates and vehicles or ordering missile strikes. And, because you can act as commander from a tablet, you don't have to be tethered to a console or PC to play.

WHAT'S GREAT:
- Stellar multiplayer
- Levolution events are spectacular
- Fun campaign level design

WHAT'S NOT SO GREAT:
- Lots of bugs and glitches
- Single-player has a lot of jarring transitions

NICK SAYS:
While vehicles are old hat, "levolutions" will add a blockbuster flavor to your favorite multiplayer maps.

OVERALL RATING:

4.5

NEED FOR SPEED: RIVALS

Fun and intensity on both sides of the chase

• Words: Ryan Scott

Street racers in recent years have boiled down to an arms race of car fetishism; EA's self-admitted to treating its ancient *Need for Speed* franchise especially cruelly in recent years, institutionalizing it into an annualized sequel factory. That changed a few years back when *Burnout* developer Criterion Games more or less took the reins of the series. And now, with the benefit of a next-gen upgrade, the studio's effective successor Ghost Games has delivered *Need for Speed Rivals*, perhaps the best open-world racing game since *Burnout Paradise*.

Chalk it up to the way *Rivals* weaves seamless multiplayer action into its cops-and-robbers scenario: Networked players can hot-swap between street racers and police officers, respectively gunning for top times and the other half in a giant city pockmarked with races and time trials. For racers, completing events brings added heat in the form of overly tenacious AI cops, threatening to suck your earned speed points dry before you can bank them at the nearest hideout. And for cops, *Rivals* is a sandbox demolition derby where harder collisions equal better busts.

It'll be a long while before you run out of races to run and cars to unlock, and the next-gen sheen makes everything very nice to look at. Most importantly, you'll have a heck of a lot of fun doing it. This series still has plenty of life left.

PERHAPS THE BEST OPEN-WORLD RACING GAME SINCE *BURNOUT PARADISE*

**CUSTOM-BUILT ** As you might logically expect from any good racing game, you can customize your car to your heart's content. In addition to indulging in the various paint jobs, decals, and vanity license plates, you can also outfit each individual car with EMPs, battering rams, spike strips, land mines, and plenty of other useful and deadly implements. Fun fact: I've already spent way too much time trying to correlate them to Mario Kart items.

**GOING MOBILE ** *Rivals'* companion *Need for Speed Network* mobile app riffs on *Battlefield's* Commander mode, giving you a bird's-eye-view of the game map and the option to drop inventory and health refills for friends or lay down obstacles for foes. It's a fun addition, though you never know when fortune (or misfortune) will favor you. Well, not unless you draft a friend to ride shotgun and fix races for you, which is totally how everyone will use this thing.

▲ Alpine roads like these are *NFS's* bread and butter. Just make sure to watch out for the trees.

▲ Head-to-head matches pit you against some pretty fierce racers. Stay in front and watch your back.

PS4 XBOX ONE
PS3 XBOX 360 PC

GAME DETAILS

NEED FOR SPEED RIVALS

INFO
Publisher: EA
Developer: Ghost Games
Platforms: PS4, Xbox One, PS3, Xbox 360, PC
Reviewed on: PS4

RELEASE DATE
November 15, 2013

MULTIPLAYER/ONLINE
Up to 6-player competitive and cooperative online

GENRE
Racing

WHAT'S GREAT:
- ❤ Tons of stuff to do
- ❤ Seamless and well-integrated multiplayer
- ❤ Lots of diversity in how various cars handle

WHAT'S NOT SO GREAT:
- ✖ The AI cops are a little too tenacious at times
- ✖ Police-side unlockables feel comparatively thin

CHARLIE SAYS:
Already picked up a new PS4 or Xbox One? This is just the kind of game you use to show it off.

OVERALL RATING:

4.25

Master Sword
You'll need this guy if you hope to stand a chance against Yuga.
Graffiti Link
Shifting into 2D is the game's primary puzzle-solving mechanic.

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: A LINK BETWEEN WORLDS

Was it worth the 20-year wait? • Words: Nick Pino

The world is a very different place today than it was 20 years ago, when *The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past* debuted on SNES. Now the only time the Cold War is mentioned is in a *Call of Duty* game, and MTV is the only place you can't watch a music video. And Link? In this spiritual successor to the 1992 classic, he can flatten his body into two dimensions.

Don't worry: This new mechanic does nothing to tarnish the perfection of its predecessor's fondly remembered gameplay. In fact, Link's constant transformation from 3D to 2D and back helps make *A Link Between Worlds* a high point in the series.

You'll need to rent items from the travelling vendor, Ravio, in order to solve some of the series' most inspired dungeons and take down a Gerudo obsessed with freeing Ganon. This means you'll need to enter a land that's the polar opposite of Hyrule—aptly named Lorule—where you'll meet that world's princess, Hilda, and be tasked to rescue seven sages (sound familiar?).

Borrowing the overworld map and many of the same weapons from its progenitor, *A Link Between Worlds* is a nostalgia-invoking love letter to fans of the Super Nintendo–era game. It excels at making you feel like you're making real progress by pitting you against tough—but never unfair—dungeons, and rewards you for exploring every nook and cranny of its world.

A Link Between Worlds is one of the few must-play handheld entries in the series, and though there are times when the ghost of the original haunts this game, it's still an enthralling romp through the lands of Hy/Lorule.

A LINK BETWEEN WORLDS IS A NOSTALGIA-INVOKING LOVE LETTER

SAVING HYRULE COMES AT A COST \\

LINK'S GOING TO NEED A BIGGER POUCH...

Unlike previous games in the series, Link has the option to rent weapons from the bunny hat-clad Ravio in exchange for a few dozen rupees. This allows you to explore dungeons in any order, but should you die Ravio will come to collect. Buy items when they become available to save yourself some time when death becomes inevitable in tougher dungeons.

PURE EVIL

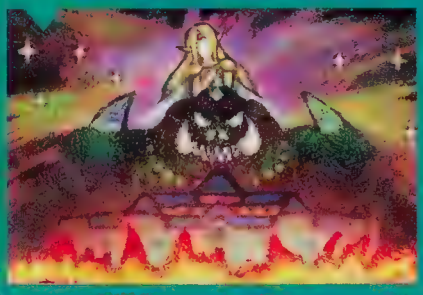
THE ELEGANT, EVIL YUGA

While he's not as powerful as series antagonist Ganon, Yuga's got a few tricks up his sleeve that will give you a run for your rupees.

A TALE OF TWO WORLDS \\

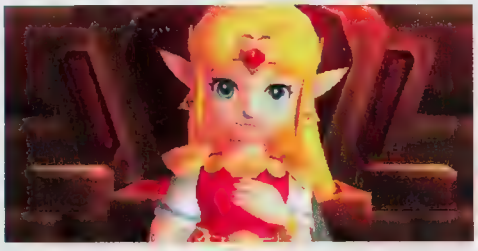
SAY "HY" TO LORULE

Mirroring the Light/Dark World settings of *A Link to the Past*, Hyrule and its depressing, dark counterpart Lorule serve as this game's expansive overworlds. The story goes that Lorule had its own Triforce long ago and, in an attempt to end a civil war, it was irrevocably destroyed by its version of the Seven Sages. After Link is pulled into her realm, Princess Hilda, Lorule's last remaining royalty, has agreed to help him on his quest to rescue Zelda from Yuga's paint-spattered clutches and restore the Triforce to the land of Hyrule...or, at least, he hopes that's her intention.



▲ The limit of the 3DS' stereoscopic screen is tested over the game's 15-hour quest.

▲ The bow is one of many items from *LttP* that makes its way back into Link's arsenal.



▲ It turns out being a kidnapped princess of a besieged kingdom is harder than it looks.

GAME DETAILS

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: LINK BETWEEN WORLDS

INFO
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: Nintendo
Platforms: Nintendo 3DS

RELEASE DATE
November 22, 2013

MULTIPLAYER/ONLINE
Street Pass "Shadow Link" multiplayer battles

GENRE
Action-RPG

WHAT'S GREAT:
- ❤ Dungeons are difficult, but rewarding
- ❤ New setting of Lorule tells a unique story
- ❤ Offers a major dose of '90s nostalgia

WHAT'S NOT SO GREAT:
- ✖ Probably won't excite folks who are just tired of the *Zelda* formula

CHARLIE SAYS:
Link to the Past's universe with *Paper Mario*–style gameplay? Only Nintendo could recycle this well.

OVERALL RATING:

4.5

XCOM: ENEMY WITHIN

Save humanity by sacrificing your own • Words: Mikel Reparaz

Getting strangely attached to your randomized troops as you guided them through battles against impossibly powerful alien invaders was one of the big draws of 2012's *XCOM: Enemy Unknown*, and you're likely to grow even more attached in the expansion, *Enemy Within*. A ranked-up sniper can, after all, eventually be replaced—but if you've poured time, money, and limited resources into upgrading them with alien gene mods or mechanical exoskeletons, you'll feel that loss much more sharply when they die.

The heart of XCOM remains unchanged—you'll still alternate between managing the alien-fighting organization at its base and directing troops in turn-based combat—but collecting the new "Meld" material during battle now lets you alter your soldiers with unlockable alien abilities (including mimetic skin that turns them invisible, and improved bone marrow that passively heals them) or hulking MEC suits (turning them into tough powerhouses without the ability to use cover). It can be hugely empowering, but it's just the start of what *Enemy Within* brings to the table.

There are new maps, including UFO crash sites in populated areas. There are new enemy types, including the formidable Mechtoids—the aliens' answer to your MECs—and Seekers, floating tentacle drones that cloak and reappear to strangle your troops. And there are new story missions, including battles against the human terrorist group EXALT, and even a semi-random invasion of XCOM's own headquarters by overwhelming alien forces, which—if you haven't been conscientiously upgrading your troops—can leave you struggling for the organization's survival with little more than a handful of rookies. More than just a DLC add-on, *Enemy Within* feels almost like an entirely new game.

▼ Those bare arms aren't just a fashion choice—they denote a gene-modded soldier.

Science!
As in *Enemy Unknown*, every advancement—laser rifles included—comes from researching alien technology.

▼ Odds not in your favor? Use a ghost grenade to temporarily cloak your operatives.

**NEW TOYS ** *Enemy Within*'s additions aren't all as huge and obvious as a stomping MEC trooper. The more subtle ones include changes to class-specific perks—assault troopers, for example, can now earn the ability to automatically shoot any enemy that gets too close—as well as new engineering projects, new goodies to be gleaned through scientific research at your headquarters, and new weapons and gadgets to bust out during combat, including grenades that can do more than just cause minor explosive damage.

**HERE COMES A NEW CHALLENGER! **

▲ **Secret Society** Apparently sympathetic to the aliens, EXALT's tactics, equipment, and genetic upgrades match your own. Shutting them down requires planting covert agents to unmask their terror cells, letting you destroy them in combat and eventually discover the location of their headquarters.

GAME DETAILS

MATURE 17+ M CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

XCOM: ENEMY WITHIN

INFO
Publisher: 2K Games
Developer: Firaxis
Platforms: PS3, Xbox 360, PC
Reviewed on: PC

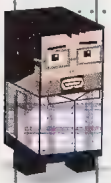
RELEASE DATE
November 12, 2013

MULTIPLAYER/ONLINE
Up to 2-player online

GENRE
Strategy

WHAT'S GREAT:
- ❤ Wealth of new content gives this expansion a distinctly different feel...
- ❤ ...but doesn't ruin what made the original great

WHAT'S NOT SO GREAT:
- ✖ Base invasions can stop your progress cold
- ✖ Constant threats leave no time for a breather



NICK SAYS:
Enemy Within will test your mettle with the new EXALT faction, even if you're a seasoned *XCOM* strategist.

OVERALL RATING:

4.75

PS3 XBOX 360

GAME DETAILS

BANDFUSE: ROCK LEGENDS

INFO
Publisher: Mastiff
Developer: Realta Entertainment Group
Platforms: PS3, Xbox 360
Reviewed on: Xbox 360

RELEASE DATE
November 19, 2013

MULTIPLAYER/ONLINE
Up to 4-player local

GENRE
Music

WHAT'S GREAT:
- ❤ Hardware allows use of a real instrument
- ❤ Visual presentation makes sense
- ❤ Decent selection of licensed tracks

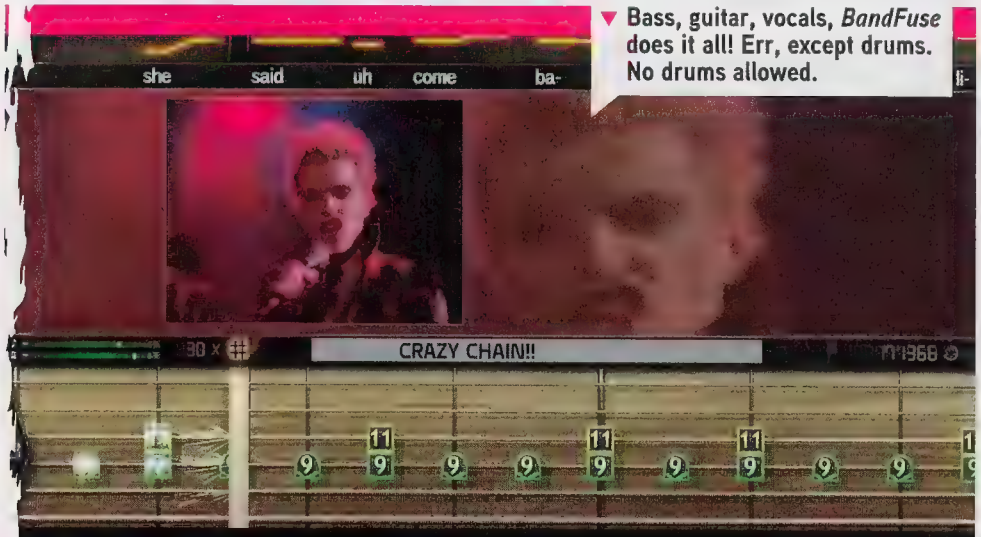
WHAT'S NOT SO GREAT:
- ✖ Unfinished interface
- ✖ Having notes scroll at you is still not a great way to learn guitar

NICK SAYS:
Bandfuse is perfect for aspiring rockers...but a bad fit for the string savvy.

OVERALL RATING:

3.25

GAMER



▼ Bass, guitar, vocals, *BandFuse* does it all! Err, except drums. No drums allowed.

BANDFUSE: ROCK LEGENDS

For those about to rock, we prepare you • Words: Scott Butterworth

As a guitarist, I've always found *Rocksmith*'s behind-the-neck camera to be counterintuitive. So I'm relieved *BandFuse*—*Rocksmith*'s competitor in the "play with a real guitar" rhythm game arena—uses a tablature-esque view that looks down on the neck from above, making the note-matching gameplay far more playable and fun.

Unfortunately, *BandFuse* trails *Rocksmith* in terms of overall content. The presentation is generally disorganized, with random band interviews intermixed with rote tutorial videos (most of which provide a visual without any actual instruction). There are interactive tutorials as well, but they're weirdly broken up and hidden among riffs pulled from the game's licensed tracks. *BandFuse* also features a conceptually compelling but ultimately empty career mode, pre-recorded backing tracks that add little to your riffing, and a solid but standard practice mode that lets you slow down and loop tough sections.

Ideally we should marry *BandFuse*'s camera with *Rocksmith*'s delivery, but for now, *BandFuse* can still be a helpful and even enjoyable tool for those already committed to learning guitar. For traditional gamers and expert guitarists, however, it doesn't offer much.

▲ With no background music over menus, the game feels somewhat unfinished.

**TALK STARS ** Who are these "rock legends" the subtitle alludes to? They're eight musicians of varying notoriety whose short interview clips supplement the actual gameplay. Some clips provide instruction, but just as many (or more) simply talk about things like, say, life on the road. Interesting for fans, but unfortunately, helpful for no one.

MARIO & SONIC
AT THE SOCHI 2014 OLYMPIC WINTER GAMES

More of a bronze than a gold • Words: Alexandra Hall

Konami's hit 1983 arcade game *Track & Field* invited players to compete in six Olympic-style events by rapidly mashing three soon-to-be-broken buttons. 30 years later, Sega's *Mario & Sonic at the Sochi 2014 Olympic Winter Games* is the latest collection of minigames to pick up the Olympic torch. I must admit, I prefer the ancient arcade game.

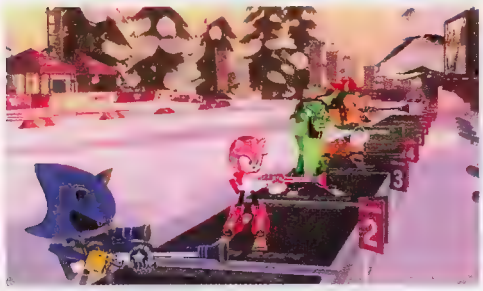
The 24 events are split between 16 real-world competitions like skiing and figure skating, and eight more whimsical concoctions, including a paintball-influenced snowball fight and a strange combination of curling and miniature golf. Some events feel similar (permutations of going downhill quickly) but the variety suffices, and an impressive array of network features allows you to upload scores and play others online.

Gameplay relies almost exclusively on motion control, which results in somewhat fuzzy, indistinct-feeling response. The inputs are mostly forgiving, but I still ended up frustrated at times in events like speed skating, which ask you to wave the Wii Remote Plus in very precise ways. Given the timing-sensitive nature of the game, I'd take simpler, snappier digital controls à la *Track & Field* any day.

The motion controls also lead to an epidemic of tutorials; left to its own devices, the game barrages you with several minutes of reading and demos every time you start an event. You can disable some of these, but good luck guessing all the little control nuances without them.

Ultimately I spent more time learning how to play than actually competing, and the motion-controlled action wasn't satisfying enough to keep me chasing the little morsels of fun. Modern Olympic games tend to be a dicey proposition, and the latest *Mario & Sonic* amply illustrates why.

▲ You lost the Olympics, now you're a janitor.


▲ As in the real Olympics, athletes who don't medal face a firing squad.

▲ Shortly after this screen was taken Amy (1992-2013) succumbed to hypothermia.

Wii U

GAME DETAILS

MARIO & SONIC AT THE SOCHI 2014 OLYMPIC WINTER GAMES

INFO
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: Sega
Platforms: Wii U
Reviewed on: Wii U

RELEASE DATE
November 15, 2013

MULTIPLAYER/ONLINE
Up to 4-player local or online

GENRE
Sports

WHAT'S GREAT:
- ❤ Attractive graphics, characters, and music
- ❤ Impressive online features for a Wii U game

WHAT'S NOT SO GREAT:
- ✖ Motion-controlled action doesn't satisfy
- ✖ Tutorials overwhelm the experience

CHARLIE SAYS:
I want quick, accessible, bite-sized bits of fun with a game like this...not endless tutorials for clunky controls.

OVERALL RATING:

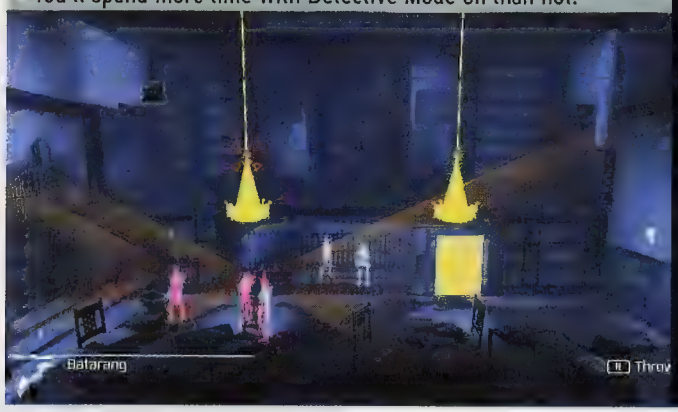
2.75

Mini Reviews:

Of course, size doesn't matter. These games are more than worth your attention.

Blackgate's brawls have an ebb and flow.

You'll spend more time with Detective Mode on than not.



BATMAN: ARKHAM ORIGINS BLACKGATE

TEEN T CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Publisher: WBIE • Developer: Armature Studio • Platforms: 3DS, PS Vita • Words: Mikel Reparaz

Combining the action of an *Arkham* game with *Metroid*-style 2D exploration is a great idea, but *Blackgate* overreaches, and consequently stumbles. Set after *Origins*, the game adds twisting corridors and multiple layers of depth for Batman to swing in and out of, but these touches are more disorienting than they are interesting—and when you factor in the top-down map (which is more suited to a 3D game world than a 2D one), finding your way around can be confusing. Still, the fights capture the attack-attack-counter rhythm of the console *Arkhams*, and as you find gadgets that open up new areas of the prison, it's a fun place to explore...if you can get a handle on its structure.

MULTIPLAYER/ ONLINE
Single-player only

GENRE
Action-adventure

RELEASE DATE
October 25, 2013

OVERALL RATING:
3.25

LEGO Marvel's colorful costumed characters pop off the screen.

Universe in Peril packs plenty of bite-sized action.

LEGO MARVEL SUPER HEROES: UNIVERSE IN PERIL

EVERYONE 10+ CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Publisher: WBIE • Developer: TT Games • Platforms: 3DS, PS Vita • Words: Matt Cabral

With *LEGO Marvel Super Heroes* landing on every imaginable platform possible, you'll have ample opportunity to collect studs, bust up blocky baddies, and solve brick-based puzzles both at home and on the go. And while the portable version doesn't pack as much content as its console counterparts, it's still a worthy entry that crams all the aforementioned *LEGO*-fueled fun into a pleasing, Marvel-themed package.

Those craving the definitive experience should stick with one of the home hardware versions, but super-fans looking to unleash the power of Marvel's caped day-savers anywhere, anytime, will appreciate this action-packed take.

MULTIPLAYER/ ONLINE
Single-player only

GENRE
Action-adventure

RELEASE DATE
October 22, 2013

OVERALL RATING:
3.75

WII PARTY U

Publisher: Nintendo • Developer: Nd Cube/Nintendo
Platforms: Wii U • Words: Andrew Hayward

Nintendo's non–*Mario Party* minigame collection gets a second go-round on Wii U, with 80 quick-hit activities split between three distinct approaches. TV Party events primarily use Wii Remotes and your television, with a game board tying the activities together, whereas House Party games tend to be more active affairs that make greater use of the GamePad. Finally, the GamePad Party games are same-screen competitive offerings that split the smaller display for use by two players.

Wii Party U has its moments of fun, as expected from a local multiplayer-centric package, but many of the brief diversions are forgettable, and nearly all lack the inspired edge of *NintendoLand*'s attractions. It might kill a little time at your next get-together, but shrug-worthy minigames do little to highlight the Wii U's distinct appeal.

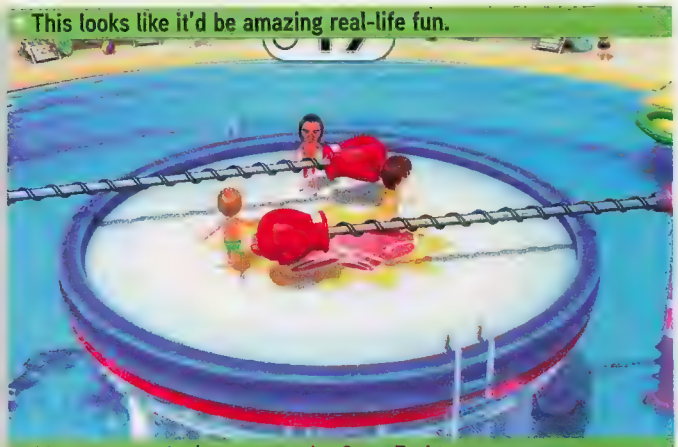
MULTIPLAYER/ONLINE
Up to 4-player local

GENRE
Party

RELEASE DATE
October 25, 2013

OVERALL RATING:
2.75

This looks like it'd be amazing real-life fun.



Many games don't even put the GamePad to use.

ZUMBA FITNESS WORLD PARTY

Publisher: Majesco • Developer: Zoë Mode •
Platforms: Xbox One Kinect, Wii U, Xbox 360 Kinect, Wii •
Words: Cheryll Del Rosario

I've become a connoisseur of fitness-game tropes. I savor amazingly toned, questionably attired instructors, high-BPM songs that are only popular in gyms, and the repetitive—but oh-so-necessary!—canned motivation from my onscreen coach. *Zumba Fitness World Party* scores high in the first two, but is disconcertingly quiet in the third. Mute instructors guide you through cultural dance moves inspired by everything from river dancing to twerking dressed in garb appropriate to their environments, but not once will you hear one word of encouragemment. You'll work up a sweat, but you'll have to provide your own inspiration.

MULTIPLAYER/ONLINE
Up to 2-player

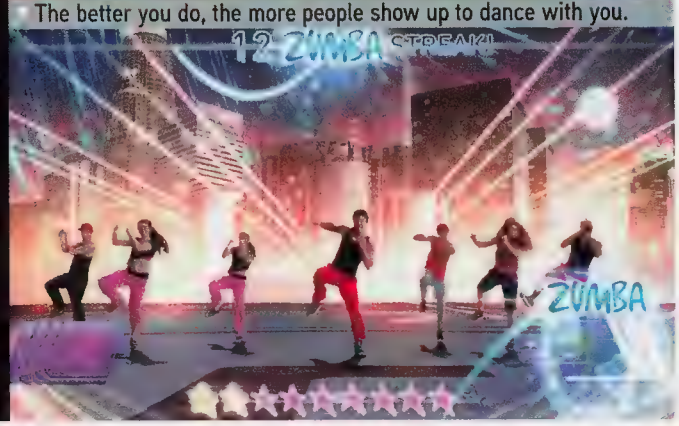
GENRE
Dance/Rhythm/Fitness

RELEASE DATE
November 22, 2014

OVERALL RATING:
3

ProTip: Tahitian dancing equals moving your knees, not your hips.

The better you do, the more people show up to dance with you.



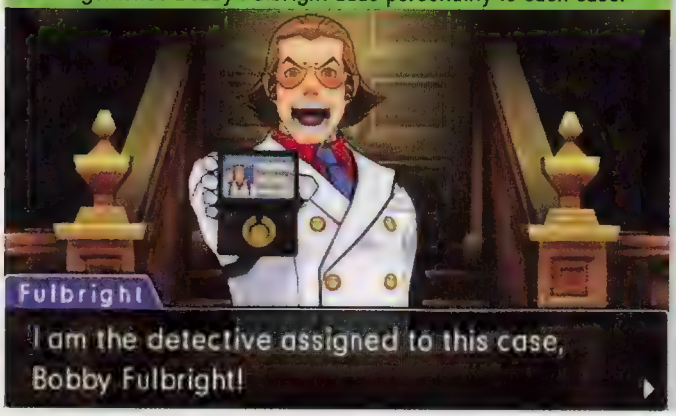
Words: Ryan Scott

DOWNLOAD DIGEST

Interested in downloadable games? *@GAMER*'s dedicated review column covers new titles, episodes, and add-ons for console and PC.

As usual, Phoenix gets a new assistant to help him bust baddies.

New gumshoe Bobby Fulbright adds personality to each case.



PHOENIX WRIGHT: ACE ATTORNEY - DUAL DESTINIES

MATURE 17+ M CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Publisher: Capcom • Developer: Capcom •
Price: $30 • Platforms: 3DS (October 24, 2013)

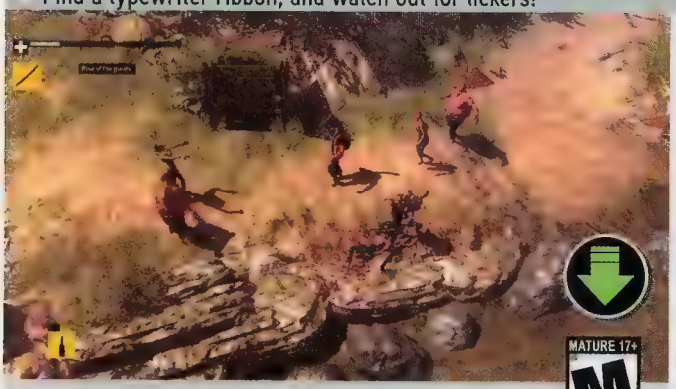
If you had told me, eight years ago, that Capcom's new-to-the-states *Ace Attorney* courtroom drama series would rack up six entire installments, I would have called you crazy. Sometimes, quirk works in strange ways.

Anyone who's followed this series should have a pretty good idea of whether or not they like it, and *Dual Destinies* won't change any minds. Aside from a buttery-smooth presentation and some new mood-matrix mechanics (which has you tapping one of four buttons when the game tells you to), not much has changed in Phoenix Wright's kangaroo court. The now-seasoned attorney still tackles ridiculous cases (did an actual walking demon kill a local magistrate?), the gameplay still revolves around pinpointing evidence at crime scenes and using it to sniff out suspicious courtroom testimony, and the supporting characters (including a new prosecutor who also happens to be a convicted felon) are as peculiar as ever.

Bottom line: It's a *Phoenix Wright* game, and it's exactly what you expect. That's a plus, in my book.

OVERALL RATING: 4.0

Find a typewriter ribbon, and watch out for lickers!



HOW TO SURVIVE

MATURE 17+ M CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Publisher: 505 Games • Developer: EKO Software •
Price: $15 • Platforms: PSN/XBLA/Wii U/PC (October 23, 2013)

Mixing a zombie-apocalypse action-RPG with *Sims*-style "needs" bars is a cool idea on paper, and *How to Survive* does the job OK. The problem is that it's *just* OK, quickly growing repetitive as faster and larger hordes of the living dead descend upon you. I think this would be fine if the story were a little less typical and cheesy, but as it is, *How to Survive* is a strictly average entry in an already flooded subgenre. It's not bad for zombie fanatics; everyone else, approach with indifference.

OVERALL RATING: 2.75

Trust me, it's more fun than this screen makes it look.

BAD HOTEL

Publisher: Lucky Frame • Developer: Lucky Frame •
Price: $5 • Platforms: PC (October 16, 2013)

Equal parts fun, frantic, and peculiar, *Bad Hotel* is a cute little indie tower defense game that has you hurriedly adding rooms to a besieged hotel, equipping it with all manner of guns and bombs as it's constantly bombarded by explosive birds, rain clouds, and all kinds of other hazards. *Bad Hotel* has some definite shades of *Plants vs. Zombies* about it, with a level of difficulty that ramps up in a much bigger way than the PopCap classic's ever did.

OVERALL RATING: 4.0

THE WOLF AMONG US, EPISODE 1: FAITH

Publisher: Telltale Games • Developer: Telltale Games • Price: $5 • Platforms: XBLA/PC (October 11, 2013), PSN (October 15, 2013)

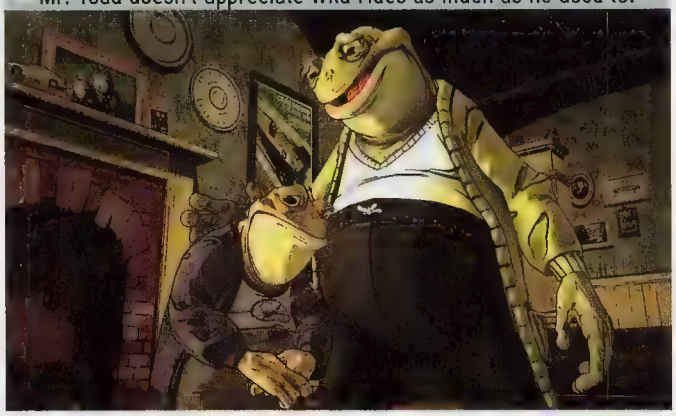
Telltale's got the episodic adventure game down to a science—and with *The Wolf Among Us*, the scrappy developer clearly intends to repeat *The Walking Dead*'s magical (and critically acclaimed) formula. Literally, actually: The first of five episodes, *Faith*, plunges you into the same sort of decision-heavy narrative structure, but with modern-day, magic-infused fairytale characters standing in for *Walking Dead*'s zombie apocalypse survivors.

The Wolf Among Us' fidelity to author Bill Willingham's *Fables* comic series is pretty astounding, and this is easily the most beautiful-looking game Telltale has ever made. Snow White, the Big Bad Wolf, and Grendel (among others) spin a surprisingly captivating, gritty noir murder mystery. Though the split-second choices don't yet feel quite as urgent or as life-or-death as those in *Walking Dead*, *Faith* spends a lot of quality time introducing the many dysfunctional storybook exiles of Fabletown, and examining how they get along (or not) in the real world. After this strong start, I'm intrigued to see where the story goes.

OVERALL RATING: 4.25

Wolves and pigs, living together...mass hysteria!

Mr. Toad doesn't appreciate wild rides as much as he used to.



Kill it with fire! No, wait...

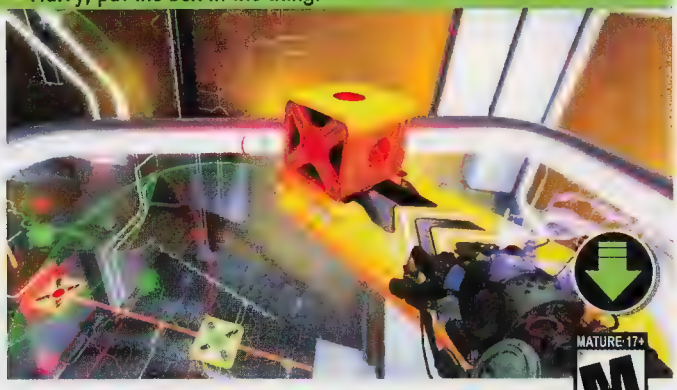
MIGHTY SWITCH FORCE! 2

Publisher: WayForward Technologies • Developer: WayForward Technologies • Price: $6 • Platforms: Wii U (October 17, 2013)

One of the few underdog developers that can get the whole modern-retro-gaming experience right every single time, WayForward has kicked its *Mighty Switch Force!* 3DS sequel toward the Wii U. It maintains its predecessor's block-manipulation mechanics, challenging you to manipulate your environment and use your trusty water hose to douse puzzling flames. *Mighty Switch Force! 2* lacks any frills beyond the earlier 3DS version, though the fun is still firmly intact.

OVERALL RATING: 4.0

Hurry, put the box in the thing!



MAGRUNNER: DARK PULSE

Publisher: Focus Home Interactive • Developer: Frogwares • Price: $10 • Platforms: PSN (Oct. 22, 2013), XBLA (Oct. 23, 2013)

In the never-ending cavalcade of platform-puzzlers that owe their very existence to *Portal*, *Magrunner* is—mostly—a cut above the rest. What it lacks in atmosphere and storytelling acumen, it makes up for with genuinely tricky brain-benders, all of which revolve around the core concept of opposed magnetic polarities. It won't win anyone over with its plot (though it gets bonus points for the cyberpunk Cthulhu vibe), but *Magrunner*'s puzzle mechanics offer all the reason you should need to play it.

OVERALL RATING: 3.5

A-Z OF @GAMER RATINGS

GAME/PRODUCT	ISSUE #	SCORE OUT OF 5
A		
Animal Crossing: New Leaf	31	4.25
Armored Core: Verdict Day	34	3.0
Army of Two The Devil's Cartel	29	2.5
Assassin's Creed IV Black Flag	35	4.5
B		
BandFuse: Rock Legends	35	3.25
Batman: Arkham Origins	34	4.25
Batman: Arkham Origins Blackgate	35	3.25
Battlefield 4	35	4.5
Beyond: Two Souls	34	3.75
BioShock Infinite	28	5.0
The Bureau: XCOM Declassified	32	3.0
C		
Call of Duty: Ghosts	35	4.5
Castlevania: Lords of Shadow—Mirror of Fate	28	4.5
Civilization V: Brave New World	32	4.0
Company of Heroes 2	31	4.5
The Croods: Prehistoric Party!	29	3.0
Crysis 3	27	4.0
D		
Dead Island Riptide	29	3.75
Dead or Alive 5 Plus	29	4.0
Dead or Alive 5 Ultimate	33	4.0
Deadly Premonition: The Director's Cut	29	4.25
Deadpool	31	4.5
Defiance	29	4.0
Diablo III (consoles)	33	3.75
Disgaea D2: A Brighter Darkness	34	4.0
Disney Infinity	33	4.0
Disney Planes	33	2.5
DmC: Devil May Cry	27	4.75
Donkey Kong Country Returns 3D	30	3.75
Dragon's Crown	32	3.0
Dragon's Dogma: Dark Arisen	29	4.25
Dust 514	31	4.0
E		
Etrian Odyssey IV: Legends of the Titan	28	4.5
Etrian Odyssey Untold: The Millennium Girl	33	4.0
F		
F1 2013	34	4.25
FIFA 14	33	4.75
Final Fantasy XIV: A Realm Reborn	33	4.25
Fuse	30	3.5
G		
Game & Wario	31	4.25
Gears of War: Judgment	28	4.5
God of War: Ascension	28	4.5
Grid 2	31	4.0
Guacamelee	29	4.5
H		
Hitman HD: Trilogy	27	4.0
I		
Injustice: Gods Among Us	29	4.25
J		
Just Dance 2014	34	3.5
K		
Killer is Dead	32	3.0
Killzone: Mercenary	33	4.25
Kingdom Hearts HD 1.5 Remix	32	4.5
L		
The Last of Us	31	5.0
The Legend of Zelda: A Link Between Worlds	35	4.5
The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker HD	33	4.5
LEGO Batman 2: DC Super Heroes (Wii U)	31	4.0
LEGO Legends of Chima: Laval's Journey	32	2.75
LEGO Marvel Super Heroes	34	4.25
LEGO Marvel Super Heroes: Universe in Peril	35	3.75
Lost Planet 3	33	3.75
Luigi's Mansion: Dark Moon	28	4.0
M		
Madden NFL 25	32	4.0
Mario & Luigi: Dream Team	32	4.0
Mario & Sonic at the Sochi 2014 Olympic Winter Games	35	2.75
Metal Gear Solid: The Legacy Collection	32	4.75
Metro: Last Light	30	4.5
MLB 13 The Show	28	4.0
MLB 2K13	28	2.5
Monster Hunter 3 Ultimate	28	4.25
N		
Naruto Powerful Shippuden	27	4.0
NBA 2K14	34	4.0
NCAA Football 14	31	4.25
Need for Speed Rivals	35	4.25
New Super Luigi U	33	4.0
NHL 14	33	4.5
Ninja Gaiden 3: Razor's Edge	29	3.5
Ninja Gaiden Sigma 2 Plus	28	3.0
O		
Omerta: City of Gangsters	27	4.5
P		
Pac-Man and the Ghostly Adventures	34	2.5
Pandora's Tower	29	3.5
Payday 2	32	3.5
Phineas and Ferb: Quest for Cool Stuff	32	3.0
Pikmin 3	32	4.5
Plants vs. Zombies 2	32	4.5
Pokémon Mystery Dungeon: Gate to Infinity	29	2.75
Pokémon X/Y	34	4.5
Pro Evolution Soccer 2014	33	4.25
Project X Zone	31	3.75
Puppeteer	33	4.5
R		
Rayman Legends	33	4.75
Remember Me	30	3.75
Resident Evil: Revelations	30	4.0
Resident Evil 6 (PC)	29	4.0
Rocksmith 2014 Edition	34	3.75
Rune Factory 4	34	3.5
S		
Saints Row IV	32	4.5
Scribblenauts Unmasked: A DC Comics Adventure	34	3.0
Shin Megami Tensei: Devil Summoner: Soul Hackers	29	3.75
Shin Megami Tensei IV	32	4.25
SimCity	28	4.5
The Sims 3 Into the Future	34	4.5
The Sims 3 Island Paradise	31	4.0
The Sims 3 University Life	28	4.5
Skylanders Swap Force	34	4.25
Sly Cooper: Thieves in Time	27	4.75
The Smurfs 2 (consoles)	32	3.0
The Smurfs 2 (DS)	32	2.5
Sniper: Ghost Warrior 2	29	3.0
Sniper Elite V2 (Wii U)	31	3.25
Sonic Lost World	34	3.25
Soul Sacrifice	29	3.75
Splinter Cell Blacklist	32	4.25
StarCraft II: Heart of the Swarm	29	4.5
Star Trek: The Video Game	30	3.0
Super Mario 3D World	35	4.75
T		
Tales of Xillia	32	3.5
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 14	28	4.0
Tomb Raider	27	4.5
Total War: Rome II	33	4.25
V		
Valhalla Knights 3	34	4
W		
The Walking Dead: Survival Instinct	29	2.5
Wii Party U	35	2.75
The Wonderful 101	33	3.0
WWE 2K14	34	3.75
X		
XCOM: Enemy Within	35	4.75
Z		
Zumba Fitness World Party	35	3.0

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HARDWARE HEAVEN RECOMMENDED

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ROCCAT ISKU

ILLUMINATED GAMING KEYBOARD

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GEAR

90 Klipsch Gallery G-16 Speaker

91 Epson PowerLite Home Cinema 2030 Projector

92 Turtle Beach Call of Duty: Ghosts Ear Force Phantom Headset

93 PDP Afterglow 5.1 Gaming Headset

94 Mionix Naos 3200 Optical Gaming Mouse

95 Razer Orbweaver Elite Mechanical Gaming Keypad

Where to purchase?

Online

Visit www.bestbuy.com for info on availability.

Photos: Michael Nieland

NICK SAYS:

As resident gear guru, there's one question I get asked more than any other: Why do I need a new <insert gear category here>? Whether it's a mouse, headset, or display, the answer is always the same. Getting new gear helps you see old games in a different light, test out a genre you're unfamiliar with, and get you pumped to play the latest release.

BIG SOUND
Although small in size, the sound output of the G-16s was anything but.
SLEEK & SEXY
The G-16s are really attractive and easily mount to a wall.

SMALL IN SIZE BIG IN SOUND

Klipsch's Gallery G-16 Speaker offers incredible audio quality

• Words: William O'Neal

The world of home audio is in an interesting place. Back in the day, your typical audiophile rocked a crazy setup replete with individual components: AV receiver, CD player, and a record player. But since the advent of digital media, many folks have moved away from more complex setups in favor of smaller wireless systems or even sound bars.

While these options are great, you can't beat a classic surround-sound setup. Able to work as a left, right, center, or surround speaker, the G-16 is an amazing addition to your setup. We used a pair of them primarily as surround-sound speakers with a sound bar, and the sound quality in both games and movies was simply incredible.

Sound Quality	4/5
Installation	4/5
Capability	4/5

KLIPSCH GALLERY G-16 SPEAKER

Manufacturer: Klipsch
Price: $299.00 each

OVERALL SCORE: 4.0

LET THERE BE LIGHT

Epson's Home Cinema 2030 offers a bright A/V solution

• Words: Nick Pino

Epson's latest projector, which retails for just under a grand, has mastered the easy setup and stellar picture, boasting a full 1080p resolution that looks great in almost any light. Its copious input options (PC-in and two HDMI ports—one of which is even MHL-compatible) made connecting most devices a breeze, but I found its lack of standard audio outputs difficult to deal with. (Seriously, no digital optical out?) It wouldn't have bothered me as much had the internal speakers delivered an above-par audio experience. Unfortunately, they do not.

While the 2030's lack of superior internal speakers hurt the overall value of the system, I found its impressive visual fidelity, 3D support, and ease of use more than made up for its aural shortcomings.

EPSON POWERLITE HOME CINEMA 2030 PROJECTOR

Manufacturer: Epson
Price: $999.99

OVERALL SCORE: 4.0

AUDIO, OUT?
The selection of video inputs is impressive, but the 2030 could've used a few more audio-out options.

DIFFERENT DIMENSIONS
The remote allows you to quickly switch from 2D to 3D... just make sure you have enough 3D glasses to go around.

LET IT SHINE
Even outputting up to 2,000 lumens of light, the 2030 still sports an outstanding 15,000:1 contrast ratio.

ARMED TO THE TEETH

The Ear Force Phantom has great sound for *CoD* fans

• Words: Ryan Taljonick

Essentially an Ear Force XP510 in *Call of Duty: Ghosts* branding, the Phantom is a high-end wireless headset that offers great sound quality and an abundance of features. These limited edition cans are a bit more comfy than the XP510s thanks to extra padding in the headband and leatherette earcups, and they aren't overly tight as are some of Turtle Beach's other high-end headsets.

Though the sound quality and battery life here are impressive, the wireless range isn't, and the mic quality is just... okay. Another bummer: As of now, this headset only works on Xbox 360, PS3, and PC—no dice on PS4/Xbox One. Still, if you're dying to shell out $300 on a wireless setup (and are a diehard CoD fan), the Phantom is sure to please.

STAND UP
The wireless base acts as a power hub and doubles as a fancy stand.

TURTLE BEACH CALL OF DUTY: GHOSTS EAR FORCE PHANTOM HEADSET

Manufacturer: Turtle Beach
Price: $299.99

OVERALL SCORE: 4.0

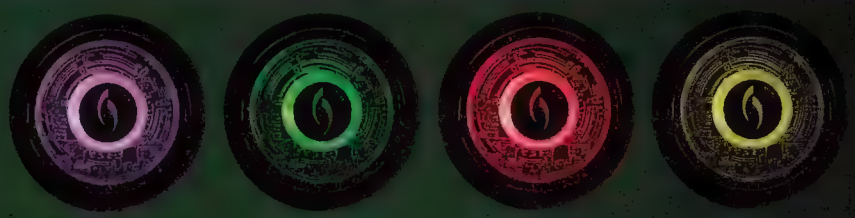
MIC WOES
The microphone quality isn't particularly impressive, but at least chat presets allow for some interesting voice alterations.

BLUE BITE
Built-in Bluetooth means you can field calls from your smartphone while you game.

SOUNDS GREAT, FEELS OK

PDP's Afterglow Headset has some disparity between comfort and sound

• Words: Ryan Taljonick



LIGHT BRIGHT
If you're into shiny cans, you can choose from about a billion different LED colors.

STAND TALL
The included wireless transmitter doubles as a glowing stand for the headset.

A relative newcomer to the headset market, PDP impressed me earlier this year with its powerful yet inexpensive Afterglow Universal wireless headset. Now the company has a high-end offering: The Afterglow Wireless Dolby 5.1.

At $200, this setup offers crisp, clean sound with just the right amount of bass, and three distinct audio presets, each with a unique flavor. Its high wireless range dominates some of its pricier competitors, it's easy to set up, and works on practically all devices and consoles (including the PS4, but not Xbox One).

My big gripe: The earcups became pretty uncomfortable after only about an hour or so of gaming, which is problematic when hundreds of dollars are on the line. Still, the sound quality here easily meets that of more expensive alternatives.

PDP AFTERGLOW WIRELESS DOLBY 5.1 HEADSET

Manufacturer: PDP
Price: $199.99

OVERALL SCORE: 3.75

MIC CHECK
The retractable mic has decent clarity, and its volume can be adjusted separately from your game audio.

IT RUNS IN THE FAMILY

Comfort is the Mionix Naos 3200's claim to fame

• Words: Ryan Taljonick

Mionix's Naos 3200 gaming mouse, like its big brother the 8200 (which scored a 4.5/5 in the October issue of @GAMER), is easily one of the more comfortable options you'll likely find. Its ergonomic shape will keep you gaming for hours on end without any fear of cramping, and its rubberized coating does wonders for keeping your palm cool, even during extended gaming sessions.

The build quality here is fantastic, though I did have one complaint: The top-most side button is a bit difficult to reach, making it impractical while playing games that require quick reaction times. It may lack the more powerful sensor and built-in memory of its higher-end sibling, but the Naos 3200 absolutely delivers as a mid-range gaming mouse.

MIONIX NAOS 3200 OPTICAL GAMING MOUSE

Manufacturer: Mionix
Price: $59.99

OVERALL SCORE: 4.25

SCROLLIN'
The build quality of each button, including the scroll wheel, is fantastic. Few mice are this fun to click.
DPI
Use these to swap between three distinct sensitivity settings for extra precision on the battlefield.
I have average-sized hands, and my thumb would rest on the bottom-most of these buttons; reaching the top one was a chore.

KING OF KEYS
Each of the Orbweaver's keys have Cherry MX Blue switches, meaning they're durable and make a satisfying click when pressed.
MEGA COMFY
This rubber wrist rest and the ergonomic palm grip above it are fully adjustable and super comfortable.
EXTRA CONTROL
The top-most button and eight-way directional D-pad are easily accessible (and mechanical!). The space-bar button underneath? Not so much.

ONE HANDED

The Razer Orbweaver is a great mix of comfort and practicality

Words: Ryan Taljonick

If portability and comfort are more important to your PC gaming experience than trash talking your opponents, keypads are a great alternative to keyboards. Razer's Orbweaver is impressive, offering 20 mechanical keys, an eight-way directional D-pad, and a fully adjustable hand-rest module that make it a viable option for mitts of all sizes.

The Orbweaver's build quality is top notch, though I would've liked a braided cable instead of the attached rubberized cord. There's no flex to speak of on the Orbweaver's keypad, and the key's mechanical switches mean they'll survive years of use.

The comfy ergonomic palm and wrist rests—along with the thumb button area—can be adjusted to fit your hand. Even so, I found the space-bar thumb key to be too inconveniently placed. It'll take a while to get acclimated to Razer's keypad, but once you do it'll be hard to look back.

RAZER ORBWEAVER ELITE MECHANICAL GAMING KEYPAD

Manufacturer: Razer
Price: $129.99

OVERALL SCORE: 4.5

PAPERCRAFT

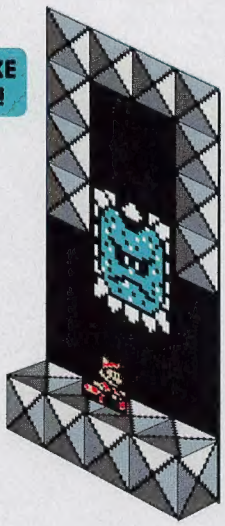
SUPER MARIO BROS. 3

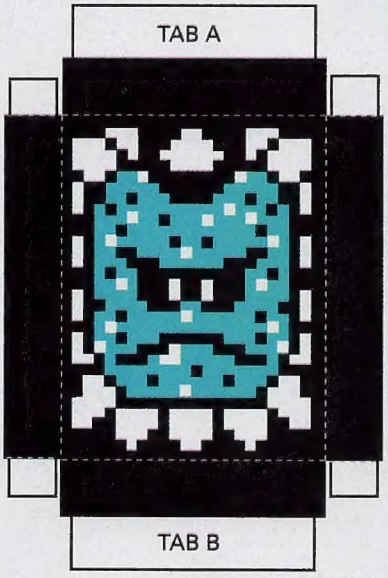
ASSEMBLE AND COLLECT @GAMER PAPERCRAFT CUTOUTS!

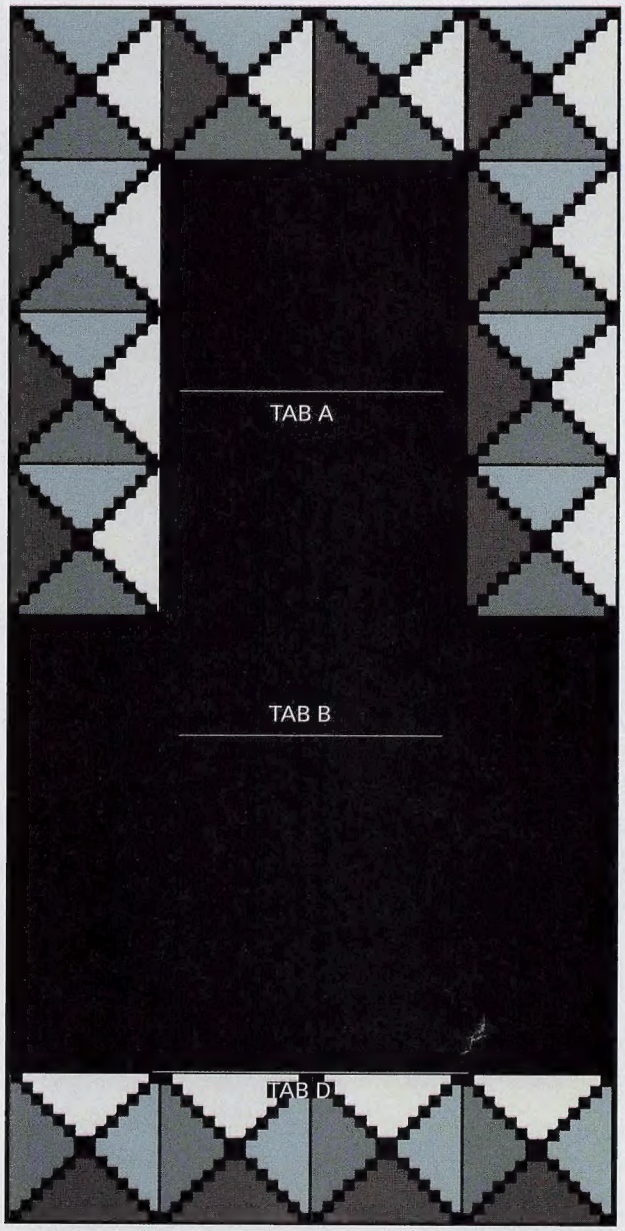
You can access an archive of our previous papercraft on the @GAMER Facebook page at facebook.com/atgamer.

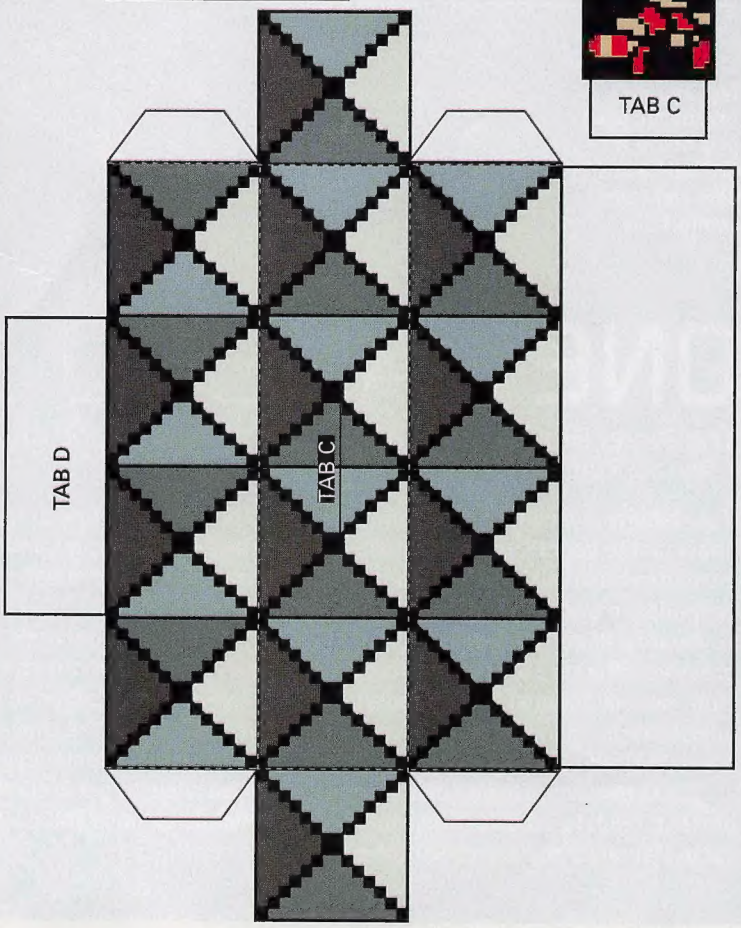
Design: Jillian Lungaro

MAKE ME!









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GAMERS AND CRITICS AGREE

#1 IN GAMING AUDIO

"SUPERB SOUND QUALITY"
-TECH DIGEST

"POWERHOUSE IN GAMING AUDIO"
-STICK SKILLS

"AMAZING"
-IGN

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